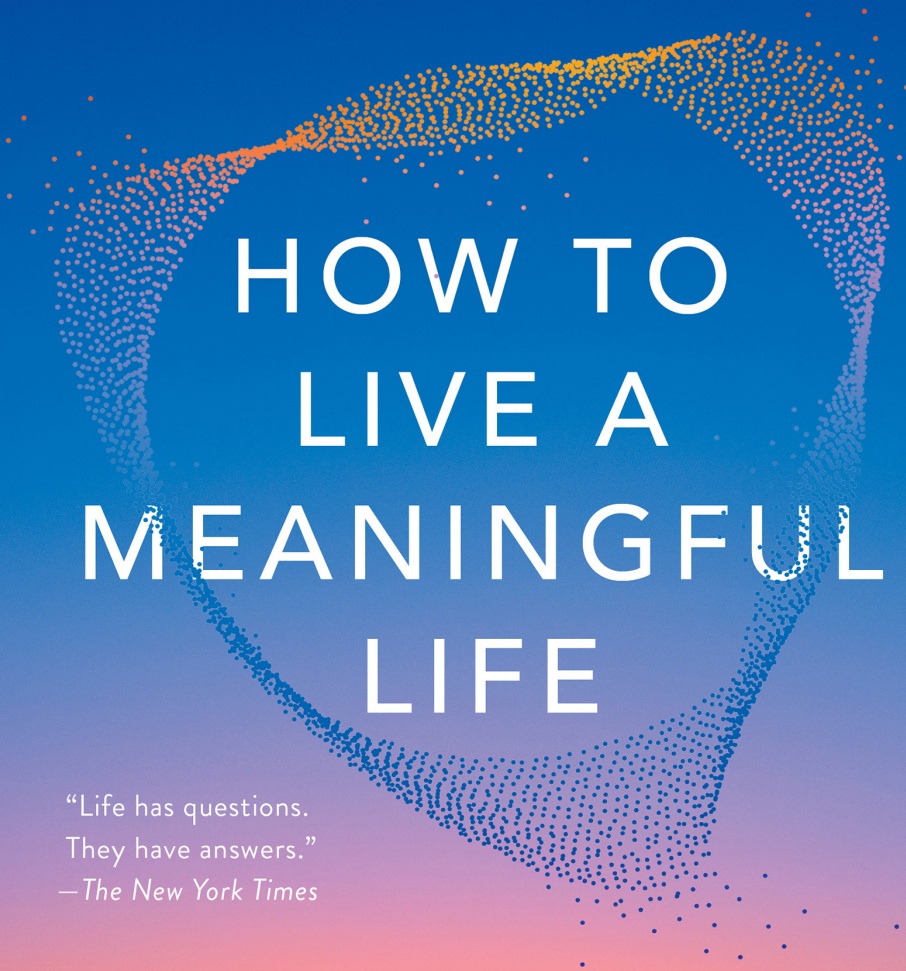
Bill Burnett & Dave Evans

#1 *New York Times* bestselling authors of
DESIGNING YOUR LIFE



HOW TO LIVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE

"Life has questions.
They have answers."
—*The New York Times*

Using Design Thinking to Unlock Purpose, Joy, and Flow Every Day

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

HOW TO LIVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Using Design Thinking to Unlock Purpose, Joy, and Flow Every Day

BILL BURNETT & DAVE EVANS

Simon Element
New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

For Connor, Clara, and Calum—my brilliant grandkids—and all the future little dreamers still to come. You are the next generation, and I believe with all my heart that your creativity will be limitless, your laughter will be contagious, and your joy will know no boundaries.

For all those dear souls who've entrusted their stories to me, for my eleven grandkids Luke, Sadie, Teddy, Duke, Kalen, Tori, DJ, Nacho, Memo, Kiki, and Nana, and especially for Frish and your willingness to make meaning in this adventure together.

INTRODUCTION

into the office—or the kitchen table on the two days a week the firm let her work remotely—and spend another eight to ten hours doing taxes and books for her thirty-seven clients' small businesses. Dinner was usually something quick and easy for her family of four, and after they were asleep, Allison often stayed up late, scrolling through her phone, watching everyone else's seemingly amazing lives. A picture of her college roommate hiking Machu Picchu. A distant cousin announcing a big promotion.

Allison ended most of these nights by tossing her phone aside in dismay and then feeling guilty for her discontent. At forty-two, she had the life of her choosing, a beautiful family, and no big regrets, but she still couldn't shake the constant feeling of dissatisfaction. Sure, most of her work duties were a bit boring and she hadn't made it to Machu Picchu yet, but those small compromises didn't seem big enough to make her feel so lousy. She knew she should be more grateful, but it felt like something was missing.

It wasn't like she was miserable; she just wasn't thrilled.

She wasn't exactly lonely, but she also didn't feel deeply connected.

Everything was okay, but okay didn't feel like nearly *enough*.

Allison spent a lot of time during her perfectly fine day at her perfectly fine job in her perfectly fine life, wondering, *What's missing?*

Sometimes, she would jolt awake in the middle of the night with different questions racing through her mind.

Why am I not happy?

Is this all there is?

What's wrong with me?

Sonya, a former student of ours, knew the word for her similar discontent: *Weltschmerz*. A German word (much like the French *ennui*) that translates literally to "world pain" but more loosely means the dissatisfaction caused by the difference between the world as it is and the world as it should be.

After Sonya graduated with a computer science degree, she had gone to a Big Tech company with a large starting salary. She spent her days writing software for some of the most popular applications on the internet, and her code was being used by millions of people across the globe. Like Allison, Sonya thought she had everything she had ever wanted. She had a great career, enough money, job security, professional status. But Sonya wanted more. Not more money or more job titles—she wanted more meaning in her life.

Sonya felt guilty for being so dissatisfied and restless; for wanting things that felt vague and nebulous to her computer science brain. Meaning and purpose felt squishy, embarrassing almost, but she still wanted to find it. Or create it. Or feel it.

Like Allison, her life was fine, but she hoped that there was something more on the other side of "fine."

Sonya came to visit Bill in office hours a couple of years into her tech job (we offer "office hours for life" to all our current and former Stanford students). Sitting in Bill's office, visibly uncomfortable, Sonya finally said the quiet thing out loud.

"I know I should be happy, and all my friends tell me how lucky I am to have such an awesome job, but it's just not working for me. I'm not that happy, if I'm being honest."

Bill asked her one of our favorite questions to ask in office hours: "Can you tell me

more?"

Sonya let out a deep sigh. "I feel bad for even saying this—I mean, this was my dream job—but writing code to make it easier to find a video someone wants, or helping our AI push the latest K-pop hit, is just *okay*. I don't feel like it's enough, and I'm not talking about money. Sure, our platform empowers the world, but at the end of the day, it is all about harvesting people's personal data so that we can sell them more ads. That's what makes us so profitable. But I keep wondering... is there something more I *could* be doing? Something more I *should* be doing?"

"What would that look like?" asked Bill. "Tell me more."

We want to be clear that office hours can sometimes sound a little like talk therapy, but it's not. Former students usually come to office hours because they have what we like to call a *wicked problem*. As designers, we love wicked problems. They aren't called *wicked* because they are bad or evil but because they have no right or wrong answer, no clear or singular resolution. The way we approach wicked problems, whether in office hours or in the design lab, is with curiosity and empathy. The design thinking process always starts with a thorough understanding and examination of the human condition that underlies the need.

So, when we ask someone to tell us more, it isn't therapy—it's one of the first steps to designing our way out of the stuck.

"At school I had friends, I was in Fleet Street [a Stanford a cappella singing group], and I had a great social life. But now because of work, I have almost no social life. I write code, so I spend most of my time alone. Post-COVID, we only go into the office for bug meetings or when there's a build, so I hardly ever get to socialize with my coworkers in real life.

"I'm kind of lonely," said Sonya, "but it's more than that... it's..."

Bill waited patiently as Sonya searched for the words.

"It feels kind of cheesy to say this out loud, but there just has to be more to work and life than this. I want more meaning, and I have no idea where to find it."

Sonya looked down at the floor intently after she said this, as if maybe some of her meaning was hiding under the rug.

Bill asked, "What do you think you want to do?"

Sonya didn't look up from the floor at Bill's question, and Bill could feel her discomfort. Whatever she was going to say was hard to say out loud.

"Whatever it is, it's okay," said Bill.

And then he waited. Until finally, Sonya took a deep breath and said, "I think I'm going to quit my job and start over. Some friends from school started an organic farm in the San Juan Island in Washington..." She looked up at Bill and smiled for the first time. "I think I'll go there, pull some weeds, and just try to get my life sorted out."

All Bill could say was, "Wow, I didn't see that coming."

And then he smiled back at her, because with design thinking, there are no wrong answers, no bad choices, only new things to try as you prototype your life.

Something More

We have had a lot of students like Sonya. There's Ergen, whose job is creating the next-generation financial platform for the world's fifth-largest bank, and David, who works on advanced AR/VR systems at Apple, and Elissa, who is working for a hot digital health start-up, trying to find a cure for diabetes.

All of them were making good salaries, working hard on objectively high-impact projects, and all had proud parents who were happy that their investment in a college education had paid off. But Sonya and Ergen and David and Elissa all quit their first jobs within two years. Each of them felt unfulfilled and lonely and had no idea what to do about it. Quitting was the only solution they could think of to their wicked problems.

But none of them needed to burn their lives down and start over.

And neither do you.

We've heard the same story about the elusive search for *something more* from folks at all stages and ages of life and career. Recently, a venture-backed group that was facilitating a confidential, invitation-only community of 350 top technology product leaders in the world—chief product officers, heads of R&D, people like that—reached out to Dave and asked if he could help them.

Dave asked Mattea, the community manager, to tell him more. These weren't recent grads new to the working world and finding their way. These business leaders were at the top of their game, building leading-edge technology used by billions and making a ton of money. What was *their* problem?

"What they're telling me is they're unfulfilled," said Mattea. "They all thought that once they got into these important positions and made their mark that they'd really feel terrific about their work and themselves, but they just... don't. They aren't *un*happy, but they're not nearly as satisfied as they expected. It's just not as meaningful as they were hoping for. Can you help them?"

Before Dave could answer, Mattea leaned in closer and corrected himself. "I mean, can you help *us*?"

Dave said he could.

While Dave was talking to Mattea, Bill was in Hong Kong talking to George, a hotel manager (you know you travel too much when you are close personal friends with your hotel manager).

"How's it going?" asked Bill.

"It's tough right now," said George. "I can't keep staff, and my best performers are the ones quitting. We had to let go of a lot of great people during the pandemic, and most of them didn't come back."

"Tell me more," said Bill.

"I pay well, in the top 10 percent for the hotel industry, and I'm willing to train people and advance them quickly. When they quit and I ask why, they tell me that they want a more meaningful job. They want more autonomy, and they want to learn and grow, not just as a hotelier but as a person. What am I supposed to do with that? I'm not a psychologist, I run a hotel. I can't figure out their lives for them! I can't give them meaning and purpose."

George is right—he can give people a job, but he can't give them what they want most:

a meaningful life.

That isn't something that can be given to you.

But you can design for it.

The Weight of the World

In office hours, our hyper-connected Gen Z students—awash in a nonstop feed of war, climate chaos, and widening polarizing politics—keep asking different versions of the same pressing question: How can I possibly focus on designing a more meaningful life when people are suffering and there are so many awful things happening in the world?

This is a great question. A hard question. A true question. And, we suspect, one of the reasons all of us can feel a bit guilty for our own life dissatisfaction, for wanting it all to matter more than it does on any given Tuesday.

And we do not mean to be glib or to minimize the suffering of so many people, but our instinct when we come across problems this big, this wicked, and this pernicious is to find a reframe that allows us to make some forward progress on the problem. The goal of the reframe isn't to trivialize the original problem—not at all. The goal is to create a question that gives you the freedom to make choices and take action.

It is also good to remember that, because of evolution, we tend to notice things we perceive as negative more strongly than we notice the positive. So...

- If you're trying to make ends meet and groceries cost more this month than last, you notice.
- If you are looking for a job in the middle of a downturn in your industry and it's harder than last time, you notice.
- If you have worked hard on some social issues and it seems like your community is taking two steps back these days, you notice.
- If you're used to having four well-balanced seasons, and the last few years have brought wild swings of rain and flooding, heat and drought, you notice.

If, like Atlas in the Greek myth, the weight of the world's problems seems to be fully on your shoulders, you can't help but notice. Life is hard for everyone, and it's easy to fall into despair. To think that nothing matters, people suck, life is too messy, and we are all doomed to lives of quiet misery.

It's equally easy to not choose despair.

There's a way to design your way forward, make choices, and take action in the midst of chaos, despite the chaos. Even in radical opposition to the chaos.

Designing your life so it feels more meaningful is the best alternative to despair and misery that we know.

And besides, being a miserable individual never made the world less miserable as a whole.

Designers always start with the world the way it is, so dealing with big issues is familiar to us. However, once you learn to think like a designer, new ideas come fast and furious,

and you find there is always something to build, to prototype, to create hope for the future.

We promise.

All of Us

This longing for more meaning may be one of the most universal things that all humans want: lives that are generative and joyful, fulfilling and connected, lives that are about more than just getting through each day, paying the bills, maybe taking a vacation now and then. And too many people are finding too few answers for how to get what their hearts keep telling them they were made for.

The meaning and purpose that they need.

The quest for meaning can seem too big and too overwhelming, but here's the thing: There is something you can do—really, actually, do—to experience a more meaningful life. Today. Right now. In this exact moment.

That's why we wrote this book. To give you some ideas and tools you can use, immediately, to start making real progress in finding more meaning in your life. Finding more meaning doesn't have to be hard. We just need better ideas, better practices, and better guidance on this quest. Each of us deserves a life that is meaningful every single day, even on the bad days and the hard days. Even on the days that are boring or feel full of endless drudgery.

We've met a lot of Allisons. And Georges and Sonyas and Matteas. We've met a lot of folks who feel overwhelmed by the "weight of the world." In fact, we'd wager that most of us, at some point, have felt exactly like all of them. Stuck, frustrated, unsure why life doesn't feel the way we thought it would. We've each felt our own version of *Weltschmerz*—and set off on our own quiet quest for meaning.

And some of us immediately got lost.

We are no exception to this. We're both very much in the trenches of figuring out how to design our lives meaningfully and joyfully in the stage of life we find ourselves in. Writing this book in 2025, we find ourselves in a radically different place from when we were writing our previous book in 2021. In those four short years, Dave lost his wife, Claudia, to cancer and is now—gratefully—poised to remarry the wonderful Frish. Bill lost his mom, his dad, and his mother-in-law. Kids have moved out of the country. Grandkids were born. Our Stanford Life Design Lab team completely turned over, and the university went through two presidents. Dave turned seventy (and Bill isn't that far behind). What used to work for us in our forties, fifties, and sixties isn't working anymore, and we're hitting the age where having plenty of time to work on the meaning problem isn't a luxury we can depend on.

But we know it's not too late. Not for us, and not for you.

Luckily, we've both been taking a pretty intentional approach to our lives—in very different ways—since our twenties, so we've got more than a century of combined trial and error with this particular design project. One lesson that keeps repeating is this: Life's going to change, and you'd better change with it. The fact that it keeps evolving is both a

challenge and a delight.

And we are writing this book for ourselves as much as for you.

From a distance, we look pretty similar (well, Dave's taller and talks faster, but that's about it). Up close, however, we are very different people. We had very different childhoods. Dave believes in God and likes Jesus a lot. Bill's an atheist and likes Nietzsche a lot.

We have different interests, hobbies, politics—you name it. But we are in complete agreement on what it means to be human. Our minds may have differing perspectives, but our hearts long for exactly the same things, and we live in exactly the same world. Our shared mission from day one back in 2007 when we started our class at Stanford has simply been to help people become more fully human. We like to say, "If you get the human part right, you can't go wrong." So, for almost twenty years now, we've tried to get the human part right—which simply means that when it comes to solving for meaning, we are offering a way that can work for anyone and everyone.

Whether it's for our clients or our students or ourselves.

How to live a meaningful life is one of the most wicked, wicked problems.

But before we get started, let's figure out where we are.

The Way Forward

Before we go further, we need to make one thing perfectly clear: This is a design book.

This is not a philosophy book, or a psychology book, or a spirituality book, or a mindfulness manual, or an inspirational guide. Those are all wonderful kinds of books, and we've read lots of them and encourage you to read some, too. But this is not one of those books.

It's critical to keep in mind that everything in this book is directed toward helping you to be effective at *making* more of something that you want in life.

And that something we are going to make is more meaning.

This is a design book.

For designers.

To make things.

And *you* are a designer.

We often get asked by new students, clients, or readers, "So, what am I going to get?" and we always give the same answer: ideas and tools. Our job is to provide some key ideas that can reframe the problem and resolve a few critical dysfunctional beliefs to free you up to more creatively design a better life, and then to give you practical, doable tools to turn those ideas into results. In the Try Stuff sections at the end of each chapter, you'll find specific instructions for how to use the tools.

To guide you in tackling the greatest design problem of all, we've divided the book into two sections. The first part provides the big ideas and mindsets for how to—and how *not* to—think about the quest for meaning-making. This section is really an invitation to a whole new point of view about meaning. While it mostly addresses the concepts that lay the foundation for how to live a meaningful life, it also includes a few initial exercises and

an assessment to help you shift your perspective into this new approach. The second part of the book provides specific tools and practices you can implement, in four key areas where meaning is readily found. It's the doing part of the book—packed with exercises you can try, test, and tweak. Together, these two sections build a practice you can understand, master, and actually live in real life.

Chapter 1 takes a look at reframing this idea of meaning and explains what we're talking about when we say we want a meaningful life. It identifies key dysfunctional beliefs—concepts that are popular but untrue or ineffective—to make sure these bad ideas don't get you stuck before you even start. We'll let you in on why *fulfillment* is a dead end, and what *the scandal of particularity* means and why celebrating it turns out to be critical to living a meaningful life.

Chapter 2 gives you an overview of design thinking and discusses how meaning can actually be designed and not just stumbled into by the fortunate. It lays out five design mindsets that will enable you to recognize meaning-making opportunities and capitalize on them. Lastly, it unpacks how *moment-making* is the actual work of a meaning designer and why getting that right is the difference between joy and frustration.

Chapter 3 opens vast new territory in which to find meaning. We will introduce you to the Tale of Two Worlds and offer a fundamental reframing of our lived experience. We will distinguish the transactional world, which we are constantly rushing to keep up with and where most of us spend nearly all our time, from the flow world, which is full of potential meaning and surrounds us constantly, but it's a world that gets easily overshadowed by all the busyness that comes with transactions.

The second part of the book begins with chapters exploring the four key components of meaning-making—wonder, coherency, flow, and community. While there are lots of other areas of experience that can contribute to meaning, these are the four that we've found to be the most universal, the most accessible, and make a big difference quickly for just about everyone.

We are big fans of both wonder and awe. People in every culture recognize this experience of being deeply struck by something mysterious and awe-some as being life-giving and meaningful. In chapter 4, we'll show you how to make the Wonder Formula work for you and practices for finding it.

In chapter 5, we define *coherency* as getting three elements—what you do, what you believe, and who you are—in alignment. We will show you how to design a meaningful life with coherency in mind.

Chapter 6 explores how to find flow—and how to step into the flow world anytime and in almost any situation.

Chapter 7 encourages you to build formative communities. We suggest that there are three primary reasons people gather: to have a good time together, to get something done together, or to *become better together*. They're all great, but that last one is what we mean by a *formative* community. People universally report that it's a game changer, and we'll give you the recipe for cooking one up.

Chapter 8 looks at how designing meaning changes (and doesn't) at different ages and stages of life.

In every chapter, we will give you a design exercise or two to help you build practices so you can experience more meaning. These practical and simple exercises are important and necessary. We want you to actually do them, not just because they are in the book but because designers build their way forward with a bias toward action.

In other words—we designers try stuff.

We ideate, we generate, we fail, we iterate, and we try again, over and over.

We don't sit at our desks, or on our couches, or in our cars and think about how someday it will all *matter*. Someday there will be the elusive *more to it than this*. Or that there is a far-off and mystical *land of meaning* that exists on the other side of a new job, a different career, a better relationship, a stunning achievement, a bigger bank account, or after retirement.

If you design for meaning, you will find it everywhere.

So let's get to it, because life is both far too long and way too short to spend our time feeling stuck.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Description 2

Description 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - Revised

When we step back and look at the question of meaning-making, the first decision we need to make is which preposition to use: *of* or *in*. Are we solving for what is the ultimate meaning *of* life, or are we looking for how to find more meaning *in* life? Which of those innocuous two-letter words we choose to focus on will make a huge difference.

The meaning OF life is *the Big Question*. Thoughtful, caring humans have struggled with it since we stumbled out of caves. This pursuit of ultimate meaning-making is at the heart of virtually every philosophy, religion, spirituality, or wisdom tradition. Are we really suggesting that we have the answer or even something important to add to this conversation?

No.

And yes.

No, we are not claiming to have a new insight on the big meaning-OF-life question—the one that Viktor Frankl was thinking about when he wrote his classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he described meaning-making as the essence of what makes us human. While we have great regard for the various traditions of deep thinkers like Frankl—and Freud, Black Elk, Jesus, the Buddha, the Prophet Muhammad, the Beatles, Taylor Swift, Lao Tzu, Maya Angelou, and all the other wisdom leaders who posed answers to the big meaning-OF-life questions—we are not going there. The question of how, at the end of life, we can look back and say our life *meant* something—in the big cosmic sense of meaning—is a question above our pay grade.

The meaning OF life is not our question because it is not, fundamentally, a design question—it's a philosophical and existential question. Its answer varies depending on your belief systems and culture. It suggests there is one right answer, and as we know about wicked problems—there is no right or wrong solution.

Meaning OF life? No—we can't solve that one for you.

Meaning IN life? Yes—we have reframes, ideas, and practical design tools ready to go.

Here's the big difference—we can help you *design* and *build* experiences, meaningful experiences, and those experiences occur in moments, and those moments occur in life. We believe, along with an increasing number of psychologists, neuroscientists, and consciousness researchers, that experiencing meaning in life is the key to happiness, and meaning can be found in lots of ways, in moments small and large, all along the way. And it turns out that people of all walks, beliefs, and cultures find the same kinds of experiences meaningful, which is to say that the experience of meaning is a profoundly human and universal thing—and that's something we can design for. Moreover, we think you deserve a life full of meaningful moments that can be readily found in your day-to-day experience. And finding more of that kind of meaning is not dependent on correctly answering the bigger question: *What is the Ultimate Meaning of Life?* Putting these tools into practice might help you develop an awareness of and a sensitivity to the bigger questions, if finding those kinds of answers is important to you.

Now that we've established what kind of meaning-making we're designing for here (i.e., the more meaning-*in*-life kind, not the ultimate meaning-*of*-life kind), what about purpose? It turns out purpose has a very similar problem to meaning. The question posed to us most often is: "How do I find my purpose?" When we lean in and look deeper, we

find the real question on people's hearts is: "How do I find my one, true purpose—the one I was born for and the attainment of which will make my life meaningful?"

Now that is a loaded question.

Purpose and Passion

Finding that *one true* purpose is just as hard as defining the meaning *of* life. The idea here is that finding your one true purpose will set the direction of your life and achieving the desired outcome of that purpose will make your life meaningful. According to this perspective, knowing your one true purpose is absolutely necessary to know what you need to do to live a life of meaning, so knowing your purpose is really important, right?

Wrong.

This longing to find the ultimate purpose that will achieve ultimate meaning is a bad idea because it simply doesn't work for hardly anyone. Most people don't ever find it, and those who do usually don't do so until later in life. That approach is leaving too many people out. We need to pick a better purpose problem to solve for.

Ultimate purpose, like ultimate meaning, is a lovely aspiration—something to grow into and live toward—but we do ourselves a huge disservice if we decide it must be a prerequisite to the well-designed life. Or a life lived meaningfully. So how do we reframe purpose into something we can design for?

It's simple. While we can't help you find your one true purpose, we can help you design how to live purposefully. We are all for living purposeful lives—lives that feel authentic, generative, growing, well directed, and contributory. We want you to live with a deep sense of purpose every single day, and we're confident you can do so despite not having arrived at your definition of your life's one true purpose. You can know that what you're doing matters to you and is an authentic expression of who you are. As human-centered designers, we believe that humans are always capable of growing, so we are all *becoming more human*. When we take responsibility for what we're becoming and invite others to join us, we endow daily life with the purposefulness of the ongoing journey of growing into our ever-better selves. Living purposefully frees us to evolve our purpose as we and the world change over time, and it enables us to fully enjoy the meaning of many, if not most, of our experiences along life's way. Essentially, we're saying that your purpose in life—*for now*—is to figure out *how* to live as purposefully as you can. In fact, we suggest that if you stop worrying about the ultimate purpose and meaning of your life and start designing ways to live more purposefully, your chance of discovering that One True Purpose is materially enhanced.

Now let's tackle ultimate purpose's dysfunctional sibling—passion. The passion question we get all the time sounds like this: "Everyone tells me to 'follow my passion,' but I don't know exactly what that means. How do I find my passion?"

The kind of passion we hear people longing for is a compelling, authentic drive that can direct our steps and powerfully animate our lives. It's a cause to be passionate about, something worth living for, a noble mission that endows us with a meaningful *raison d'être* that gets us up every morning and validates our self-respect for the person looking

back at us in the mirror every night. The kind that is sure to give us a magical, dependable, nearly limitless source of energy from within.

We have heard literally thousands of individuals tell us about their quest for passion but have met precious few who can sincerely claim to have found it. The problem with passion is as simple as a pronoun.

"I want to find my *passion."*

That *my* is killing us.

Those two little letters take us off the road to meaning and joy and down a dead-end highway to frustration. Looking for *my* passion implies that there is one—and just one—solution, and finding that one, true, right, authentic, wonderful, dependable thing to be passionate about is the prerequisite to living a good (i.e., meaningful) life. Society has bought into the idea that there is this one thing out there, and if it's the real thing, it'll be something we *can't not* do and *can't imagine not* pursuing.

Few of us state this conviction so explicitly, but it is how so many people we've talked to, and even more that we've taught, think. We may not have confessed to ourselves that we'll accept nothing short of a singular "can't not" life conviction, but it's evident when we repeatedly denigrate or dismiss opportunities that align with what we care about because they just aren't good enough. Or because we're not bursting with passionate enthusiasm. Or we haven't found that magical energy source.

The way to get out of the passion dead end is to flip from *my* to *how*. It's not about finding *my* passion, it's about finding *how* to live passionately. Once we're free of the soul-crushing presumption that we're all on a search for *our* one singular passion, we are ready to design a life full of passionate energies. And living passionately is not only possible; it's a whole lot of fun.

Now, if you happen to be one of those rare people who has found their one true passion and are happily on your way to total fulfillment, we think that's great. Really. We wish you well and hope you're duly grateful to be one of the few to have discovered such clarity and confidence. But most of us aren't there, so we need to think differently about the passion and purpose questions.

Once you get the hang of design thinking, we expect you'll discover that there are oodles of untapped purpose and passion lurking in your everyday experience, moment to moment. The key to releasing that untapped wonderfulness is to simply ask, "How can I bring more passion to what I'm doing now?" or "How is a noble purpose being pursued by this activity?" Recognizing that there is *some* degree of purpose or passion available in nearly everything you do shifts the entire game. It's all about getting more out of many daily experiences, not just waiting for that one special unicorn experience.

And it's worth reiterating that you don't need to prepack any purpose or passion before you begin your travel on the road to a more meaningful life.

Three Reframes

In our work, we find that most people care deeply about having a life full of meaning, fulfillment, and impact. Almost everyone we meet wants to make an impact, and they are

all on a quest for fulfillment, which is usually defined as having a life in which one feels that they've been able to fully express themselves in thought and action in the world. And to get it, everyone seems to be chasing *more*—more experiences, more purpose, more love, more impact, more money, more fulfilment, and so on. However, for most of us, the definitions of *impact* and *fulfillment* are quite fuzzy. And the research says that chasing "more" doesn't seem to result in much long-term happiness. That said, everyone is clear they're not getting enough meaning or having enough impact, and they are not fulfilled yet, but they are not sure what to do about it.

These folks, like Allison and Sonya from the introduction, are stuck. Most of the time, what gets people stuck are what we call *dysfunctional beliefs*, perceptions about their problem or its solution that are either untrue or unhelpful. As we said earlier, a good designer knows that when you're stuck, the situation calls for a reframe. To be sure we're working on the right problem, one for which we can actually design a successful solution, we're going to give you three reframes. These are three different ideas about what meaning and purpose are and where to find them—one about having an impact (and why it's not what you think it is), one about fulfillment (which turns out to be unattainable), and one about particularity (which just might be the key that unlocks the whole thing).

Let's get ready to reframe!

Brace for Impact

Just about everybody wants to "have an impact." They want to "make a difference" or even "change the world." They hope that if they can find a way to make an Impact (with a capital *I*), their life will be meaningful. Sadly, an awful lot of people are finding that impact is just out of reach—often due to no fault of their own.

Dave graduated from Stanford in 1976 with a Master of Science in Thermoscience—he earned the designation of an advanced energy technologist. Dave had a passion to solve the energy crisis and had his newly minted master's degree to prove it (which had been paid for by the research division of Chevron Oil Corporation, no less). Only one minor problem. In 1976, there was no advanced energy technology *industry* to work for. What no one told Dave as he was preparing to go forth and save the world was that the world wasn't ready for saving—and wouldn't be for over three decades.

Dave had the right idea, but its time hadn't come yet, so like millions of other well-intended but unsuccessful people with bad timing, Dave was having zero impact. He was heartbroken and thought life had no meaning because he couldn't make an impact. He felt like he had failed.

Eventually, Dave pivoted to a career in tech and had a big, if completely different, kind of impact. But even as he acknowledged having an impact (he was the world's first mouse product manager at Apple), it still didn't feel all that meaningful.

Dave was making the same mistake many of us make. He was putting all his meaning eggs into the impact basket, which is often a recipe for disappointment.

Here's a cycle you need to watch out for. When you succeed in accomplishing something you set out to do, and actually make an impact on something, it feels great.

But no result or impact is big enough to supply a lifetime's worth of meaning. Even incredibly impactful people—Nobel Prize winners, world leaders, corporate titans, Olympic athletes, best-selling authors—often fall into depression after the hoopla surrounding their success, their impact, has subsided. We call it the "What have you done for me lately?" syndrome.

In fact, Dave has worked with some Olympic athletes in a program set up by the Olympic committee for athletes who had "aged out" of their sports. The data on the mental health of these post-Olympian athletes isn't good—there is a lot of depression and anxiety in this population, and no wonder. Imagine you've spent your life since age six training and competing as a speed skater, and perhaps you've even won Olympic medals in your time, only to find yourself at twenty-five or twenty-seven too old to compete against the young kids coming up in the sport. You have another sixty or seventy years ahead of you, and the likelihood of achieving something as big as a gold medal in another career is low. The question is: How do you handle this? How is an Olympic gold medalist supposed to cope with having their maximum impact in the world peak as a teenager?

This is why there is something inherently problematic about using impact as the essential source of meaning. Impact is the result of a series of actions in the world. When circumstances prevent you from achieving impact, you feel bereft and useless, even though you know that some things are out of your control. Impact is an outcome. It is produced. It is a *thing*. And a *thing* cannot have ultimate meaning; it is limited to a specific time, place, and consequence. You, on the other hand, are a wonderful, emotional, continually growing, multidimensional person. Impact, which is only a *thing*, cannot satisfy the deepest yearnings of your wonderful, multidimensional self.

Now, don't get us wrong—making an impact is a good *thing*. We need lots of positive impacts, and achieving them *can be* meaningful, but impact doesn't bring with it a lasting experience of meaning. As we'll unpack further in chapter 3, impact and outcome are all part of the transactional world, the world of getting stuff done and achieving results—and the world where nothing is ever "enough." Go ahead and enjoy the temporary meaning of your impact and achievement, just don't expect it to last (and as we'll learn when we get to the idea of particularity, nothing lasts, and that's entirely okay—wonderful, even—because it means more's on the way).

The moment when you realize something you have designed or built had a positive impact, you're doing a good thing; you're on the right track. Just be aware that the impact you created is temporary and the experience of impact is fleeting. We're designing something different—a way to live where we don't rely on impact to create meaning for ourselves. We can enjoy what impact has to offer, but we're not expecting anything from it that it can't deliver. And we can learn how to become attentive to other kinds of meaning that are available along the way as we're working on making that impact.

Reframing impact as temporary is good. Reframing impact as a pointer to more meaningful experiences is even better—like enjoying the community with your collaborators or savoring the magic of the moment when a colleague suddenly has the big idea. Breaking free from the never-ending quest to "make a bigger impact" allows us to pursue other forms of meaning in life—and this is the best approach to finding what

we're looking for.

Now let's look at another particularly pernicious and dysfunctional belief about meaning that is getting in our way—the quest for fulfillment.

Have You Seen My Fulfillment?

Fulfillment is a different animal. People mean different things by it, but most often what we hear people aspiring to is a life that lets them fully express their entire and true selves. The fulfilled life is the fully expressed life. We don't mean just a full life. Most of the people we encounter have completely "full" lives. Their calendars are jammed, and they've not a spare minute to add something new. Life is totally full—but it's not fulfilling, and that's what they really want.

It's something we all want. And it's something our friend Allan sure as heck wanted, but no matter how hard he tried, he just wasn't finding it.

Allan was about ten years into his career. He'd gotten a sociology degree from a lovely small liberal arts college in the Southeast. Fortunately, he was pretty savvy with spreadsheets and had a real knack for organizing things. With those strengths, he'd managed to establish himself as a project expediter—handling scheduling and resource allocation for a financial software company. He was quite enjoying the opportunity to feel a part of something bigger than himself coordinating the efforts of a large engineering team working on multimillion-dollar projects. But he was disappointed that his role didn't have much need of his artistic creativity, his self-expression. Because the job "wasn't big enough," it drained the joy from his experience. He imagined that there was some other job, somewhere else, that would be a more perfect fit for him, that would be more fulfilling (engaging all his talents and abilities), though he had no idea what that might be, or even where to look.

At his core, Allan worried he was *settling*.

We all feel that way sometimes—that we are just *settling* for something less than our ultimate best, something less than the life we deserve. Allan's not alone. Frustration at not achieving fulfillment voices itself in a variety of ways:

I just can't bring my whole self to this job! It's so unfulfilling.

My creativity needs a bigger outlet for expression—I can't achieve what I'm capable of!

There's really no place I can be entirely myself. How will I fulfill my destiny?

It feels like there are big chunks of me that I never get to show to the world.

Realistically, people shouldn't expect one job, one relationship, or one life circumstance to deliver that fully baked, all-encompassing self-fulfillment. Nevertheless, everyone seems to be seeking a life that includes all the creativity, all the sex, all the love, all the accolades, all the status, and definitely all the money that they want—a life in which they've got a high confidence of fulfillment success. Too many people, even when things are pretty good, let their joy be diminished by the worry that it's not enough, it is not complete, and that they'll never reach the elusive state of fulfillment.

A person whose life is fully expressed and whose entire and true self is realized in the world has been described as a *self-actualized* person. Back in 1943, Abraham Maslow first

defined self-actualization as the top level of five human needs in his seminal paper "A Theory of Human Motivation." The notion of *self-actualization* as the highest form of human expression caught on quickly and has persisted ever since.

Maslow posed the idea that humans are focused on evolving sets of needs. People march up the ladder of this hierarchy, and at the apex of human existence is *self-actualization*, which Maslow describes as follows:

> *[Self-actualization] refers to the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.*

Maslow may have first articulated that idea in 1943, but it's still as popular and relevant today as ever.

The National Institutes of Health describe Maslow's hierarchy of needs as "one of the most contagious ideas in the behavioral sciences." With all due respect for Maslow, we see it differently. Simply put, we think this definition of self-actualization is wrong, because it's unattainable and unhuman.

The problem here is that this lofty aspiration of a fulfilled life, where all of you gets expressed and positively valued in the world, depends on three things that we think are false, based on some fundamentally dysfunctional beliefs:

1. that there is only *one of you* "in there"; and
2. that *one you* can be "optimized" around self-actualization and thereby be fulfilled; and
3. your value is tied up in how others view your contribution, a valuation over which you have limited control.

This is a far-too-narrow view of who you truly are—and letting others define your worth is always a recipe for failure.

So, let's blow up these dysfunctional beliefs once and for all!

Walt Whitman said, in "Song of Myself," section 51, "I am large. I contain multitudes." We agree—we have always said that every person contains far more *aliveness* than can be expressed in one lifetime. We often run a "multiverse" experiment in our classes and workshops where we ask people, "How many lives would you want, if you could live in many universes at the same time (the multiverse)? You can be the astronaut you wanted to be when you were ten, and the chef, and the rodeo clown, and the billionaire.... You can have all these lives at the same time and, better yet, be aware of and experience every life fully. How many lives do you want?"

The answer, averaged from thousands of people, is... seven.

That's how many concurrent lives people want if they could have it all. What this means is that there are more than one of you in there. What that means is you can't ever express and experience *every* part of your personality, interests, capabilities, passions, longings, and opportunities. It's impossible—you are too vast! Every person on earth contains far more life than one lifetime will permit to be expressed—so no one can "become everything that one is capable of becoming." Isn't that great?! Whitman was exactly right—we are all large. We are all multitudes.

Which means, of course, the self-actualized "one person" model is a fallacy. To be actualized requires that there be only one version of you, and that makes no sense. We are all an intersection of multiple people. Bill is an engineer, a designer, a teacher, a writer, a husband, a father, a grandfather, an artist, and far too many other things to list. Dave is many people as well. You are also an intersection of many, many identities, and there is no "one identity" that can be optimized over all the others. And trying to optimize all your identities is a waste of time and an exercise in frustration.

Finally, letting others determine the value of your life is a very bad idea, one that, with the pervasive penetration of social media, the rise of influencers, and the overwhelm of internet bubbles and bunkers, has been weaponized to create the loneliest and most anxious society ever. So much so that the surgeon general has recently called for warning labels, like the ones we put on cigarettes thirty years ago, to warn users of the dangers of this kind of perverse and false value setting and attention stealing and crowd bullying. You are the final judge of the value of your actions and intentions—no one else.

The reframe is that you can't be *fulfilled* (i.e., have every aspect of your personhood fully expressed and appreciated, because you are too big to fit into a single lifetime). However, you can be *fully alive*, which means completely present for and fully experiencing the life you are in right now. Once you understand this, your mindset shifts, and it turns out that self-actualization is no longer your goal—it is not the apex of human experience. Even Maslow realized this, and toward the end of his life, he became disenchanted with self-actualization. In his diaries that were unpublished at the time of his death, he made a correction and added a new final level to his needs pyramid—a new definition of a well-lived life, which he called *self-transcendence*. Self-transcendence goes beyond the ego needs of actualization and accomplishment—you might recognize this insight if you practice a religious or spiritual tradition, where it is most often called *compassion*.

This final insight from Maslow frees us from the impossible task of attaining a fully realized, fully optimized self and sends us on a very different journey. With self-transcendence, the goal switches from optimizing the self to moving toward something bigger than yourself—which leads us right back to wonder and mystery.

We can learn to transcend ourselves by joining in the larger flow of reality surrounding us at all times and so become fully alive. And that's something we can design our way into.

So, where will we find this fully alive experience? To answer that question, we need one more big idea to reframe meaning.

The Scandal of Particularity

Every design journey begins with reality. A sign above the Loft—Stanford's graduate design studio—declares, "You Are Here," reminding students to anchor themselves in this exact place, this moment, these constraints. Designers don't start with how they *wish* the world were; they start with the world as it is and embrace their position at the very start of problem-finding.

There is literally no other place we can start from.

Yet many of us think that there is something missing in our lives, and that's why we're less happy and less fulfilled than we think we deserve to be. Something from our past isn't right, or the thing we desperately want is in a future that hasn't happened yet. So off we go to find that one or two or ten additional achievements, relationships, or possessions that will fill our meaning and impact cup to the brim. The result is often a hugely overscheduled, overstuffed life, one where the happiness we seek is still just out of reach, somewhere in an unresolved past or a hoped-for future. Because we are not "starting in reality," we are no happier than before—but we might be more exhausted and more disappointed than ever.

We think we've all been sold a bill of goods.

"*More*" is not the path to a meaningful life. You do not have to find a way to do more, optimize more, or accomplish more to find greater meaning in your life. You do not have to be more empathetic, meditate more, hack more of your bad habits, or manifest your thoughts more. All you have to do is learn how to celebrate the here and now and embrace the *scandal of particularity*.

The first step in doing that is to understand what we mean by *particularity* and accept that it's scandalous. Our definition of *the particular* is a real something that appears in a specific time, place, and shape—something we can observe, engage with, or build upon.

The concept of *particularity* shows up in many philosophies and religions—again, it's not a new idea. However, when you think with the mindsets of a designer, it is a big idea and one that is core to our approach to meaning-making. It starts with the observation that we are finite creatures living in reality, and we can't actually "do" or "make" the ultimate of anything.

The only things we can do are specific actions in the real world. Remember, once you eliminate what you *wish* would happen or what you think *should* happen, then it becomes clear that the particular is where the ultimate and the universal have the chance to appear, in a moment of time and space, and become concrete.

We can't do utter beauty, but we can make a beautiful birthday cake.

We can't know the ultimate truth, but we can design a very good cushion for meditation.

We can't do perfect unity, but we can facilitate the family all endorsing whether it's mountains or beach for the upcoming long weekend.

We can't embody complete honesty, but we can find a way to give a colleague some difficult news in a respectful way that helps them hear it.

The point is that we can't *do* the ultimate of anything. The ultimate is always beyond our reach. It's a myth, because we are fundamentally finite, imperfect humans living in an imperfect world. Accepting our finite self is another example of designers "starting in reality." What we can *do* are these little particular things, in real time, in real space, with real people, with lots of real constraints and limitations. But the wonderful thing is that those particular things can become the gateway to *experience* the ultimate, of which they are a small, but real and authentic, expression. That cake was indeed beautiful (especially to the four-year-old who received it) and in so being, that particular cake can be a portal

into the ultimate reality of beauty (and relationships, and love, and family).

Here's a fundamental design constraint—we think that the particular is as good as it gets. There is no reality that we encounter (in this life anyway) that isn't utterly particular. Once we accept that, then we are free to recognize that it's totally wonderful and utterly terrific—if not downright magical—that these little cakes and weekend planning conversations actually have the power to let us enter into experiences of huge, universal, ultimate realities—like beauty, truth, love, unity, integrity, creativity, and joy.

That's where the scandal comes in. It's actually downright scandalous that the most wonderful and mysterious things we can imagine can only come to us through these profoundly small and even pedestrian particularities. It's kind of crazy, even a bit offensive, that this is how reality works. Our egos want to think that experiencing the ultimate takes lots of hard work and can only be accomplished with a strict regimen of meditation, or extreme yoga, or "something" that is esoteric and difficult. Is it really possible that something as big and profound as beauty actually fits into a four-year-old's birthday cake? What about a single cupcake?

Yes and yes.

And no—not all particulars are created equal. If you'd like to argue that a Beethoven symphony holds more beauty than a child's cupcake, we won't argue with you. But... that symphony, too, is utterly particular. It's only so many notes on so many different instruments played in just so many minutes by so many musicians. That's it. It might be a kind of particular that more readily releases the experience of transcendent beauty, for you, than do other particulars—but it is no less a particular for that. For someone else's taste, it's Metallica, or Yo-Yo Ma playing Bach's solo cello suites. No matter your particular way in, the entire universe is a huge pile of the particular.

And yes—gaining mastery in your capacity to attend to, apprehend, and fully experience those particularities makes a difference. Dave's been going to a remote monastery on silent retreat once or twice a year for thirty years. Some of the monks he's met there have been deeply meditating daily for fifty years. They're really good at it and far better than Dave will ever be. Their investment in mastering meditation matters to them, but that particularity of their lives in no way diminishes the meaningfulness of Dave's (probably shallower but nonetheless authentic) experience when he sits with them. Mastery is good, but it's not a prerequisite to a meaningful life; it's just a path to a richer future. All any of us can ever do is enter the particular moment presented to us in the life we are actually living right now.

Stop worrying if the best is yet to come and start celebrating the good that's right in front of you. *That's* where the best is found.

Once we accept all this, then the smart move is to embrace it. As they say in the adventure experience training company Outward Bound, "If you can't get out of it—get *into it*!" So, let's *celebrate the scandal of particularity*—and come up with ways to more fully experience the wonderful universals and ultimates that are lying within the dozens of particulars that populate each and every day.

Another word for the particular is *moment*, and we will talk even more about moments and moment-making in the following chapters. But rest assured, as a designer

of moments, you have all the raw material, right here and right now, to experience all the meaning you need.

Practicing this way of life allows us to access the deeply meaningful moments that are hidden in the particular and concrete events of our lives. Moments are inherently available, but sometimes we don't see them, because we are looking in the wrong place, and we need to clear away distractions to get to the good stuff. Assembling a life with lots of those meaningful experiences and moments is a primary way of becoming the fully alive creature you deserve to be.

Getting More Out Of… Not Cramming More Into

Once you've learned that impact will not, by itself, make your life meaningful, and self-actualization is not your highest goal, then you've set yourself up for success in the meaning-making business. When you are ready to embrace the scandal of particularity, then you are ready to experience a world full of particular moments of meaning. And that means that this search for a meaningful life just got a whole lot easier.

It's not about cramming more momentous experiences into your life. It's about getting more out of all the particular moments you already have.

Hopefully that is a big relief! You don't have to do more, or need more, or buy more stuff (except maybe this book, though libraries are great!). Our meaning-in-life framework comes with the scandalous observation that particular moments, when experienced with a designer's mindset, can point to the experience of the ultimate—and it's all under your control. No one can take your *particular* away from you, because your moments are unique in a universe of billions of possible moments. And it doesn't take years of practice—in fact, it is available right now, in the moment you are reading this.

Right *now*.

It's all about your mindset and how you reframe what's going on in the world, your reality, and the exquisite particular moment you are experiencing.

We can't emphasize this too much—this is all doable, by real people, in the real world, just like you.

We've reframed the idea of meaning-making, which is *what* we're after here. In the next chapter, we're going to address *how* we go forward by sharing what the designer's mindsets are and how they can accelerate us getting what we're after. But first, let's do an assessment exercise to get a better handle on where *you* are and what these reframing ideas might mean to you.

TRY STUFF

This chapter introduced you to three big ideas to help you reframe your pursuit of meaning-making:

- Meaning is more than impact, much more.

- You can't be fulfilled, but you can be fully alive.

- Your life is made up of meaningful, particular moments, and that's downright scandalous.

If you understand these three ideas, you will have accomplished a major reframe, resulting in a new point of view, or POV. POV is an important concept in design (and architecture, and photography, and art, and… and…). It means where you stand when viewing something. Where you stand completely changes what you see, and what you see determines what happens next. So, it makes sense to assess your POV on meaning so you know where you stand, and if and how you may wish to change that stance. This exercise is a simple reflection on your POV on these three big meaning-making ideas.

Your POV Assessment

Simply complete the following assessment, then reflect on what you're discovering. Let these insights guide and support you as you continue reading this book and trying out these ideas and tools.

Impact Assessment

You play many roles in your life, at work, at home, with family and in other relationships. Put these roles in order of importance to you and write a short reflection on where you think you make the most impact on others.

- When you succeed in making some sort of impact—large or small—how does it make you feel? How long does that feeling last?

- Does impact seem to make you a better person or grow you into a more authentic version of you? If so, how, and if not, why?

- This chapter claims that if impact is one's only or primary form of meaning-making, that is a recipe for getting stuck on the treadmill of "never enough." Does that ring true to you? Is it encouraging or discouraging, and why?

Fully Alive vs. Fulfilled Assessment

- How attractive or unattractive to you is Maslow's definition of "fulfillment" as "becoming all that one can be"?

- If you had to pick between being "fulfilled" (i.e., having all your capacity expressed in this life at some point, even if only briefly) versus being "fully alive" (i.e., being vibrantly present and engaged in each and every moment of your life), which would you pick and why?

- How does the idea of "self-transcendency" free up or expand the opportunity for you to have a meaningful life?

- This chapter proposes that "fulfillment" is a myth because all of us contain far more aliveness than one lifetime can hold, so we can't become all that we are, but we can be fully alive moment to moment. Do you agree or

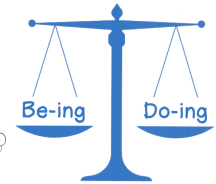
disagree, and do you find the idea encouraging or discouraging? Why?

Particularity Assessment

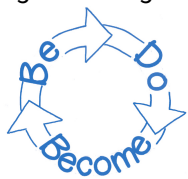
- How often does it seem to you that some aspect of your life "just isn't enough"?
- What do you most want, and will there ever be "enough" of it?
- How good are you at noticing and appreciating "the little things" in life (i.e., the moments of life)?
- This chapter claims that we can't ever *fully* experience any ultimate or universal (like love, beauty, etc.) and only can experience fleeting aspects of those things in moments (in the particular). Is that proposition encouraging or discouraging to you (or both), and why?
- If you fully accepted that the best of life is a series of particular moments, what would that mean?

POV Reflection

- Look over your responses. What do you notice? What jumps out at you as important?
- What questions does this raise for you? (This may take some time to answer.)
- How is the whole idea of meaning-making changing or getting clearer for you, and how does that feel?
- What, if any, changes in your POV about meaning are you ready to make at this point?



We don't see it that way. We see being and doing as complementary parts of a virtuous cycle—



the Be-Do-Become cycle.

we keep iterating and prototyping design thinking itself.

Back in 1963, the group we taught in was called the Stanford Product Design Program, and it focused on making products of all kinds but overwhelmingly physical products—anything from spatulas to MRI machines. By the '70s, personal computers were popping up everywhere, and we were designing lots and lots of software as well as physical things, but the focus was still on making products. When user-friendly computing came on the scene in the early '80s (which Dave got to work on as Apple's first mouse product manager and Bill got to work on as project leader for Apple's first portable computers), we started designing not only computers and software but designing the experience of using them. U/X (user experience) design was born as a whole new design discipline. Design was evolving, so we changed the name to the *Stanford Design Program*—dropping *Product* from the title, since we were by then making lots of things beyond products. We were designing company cultures and education systems and all manner of non-product things and experiences.

When we launched the course Designing Your Life in 2010 and the book in 2016, we expanded design thinking into yet a new arena—life design. And it worked! We had to make some modifications and additions, because designing a life is a very different challenge from designing a computer mouse or a spatula, but those changes worked. Once again, the simple but powerful innovation principles of design thinking succeeded in helping millions of people reframe a challenging problem (*What do I do with the rest of my life?!*) and come up with creative, satisfying, doable solutions.

We're inventing yet another new category of design—meaning design. And you are all becoming meaning designers.

When we first shared our ideas about starting up the Life Design Lab at Stanford and teaching "life design" classes, some of our most respected colleague designers and professors thought we were nuts (some still do). And just like life design a dozen years ago, meaning design is a different animal—it's a new thing. It requires a different orientation to *what* it is we're making, *how* to go about making it, and the *mindsets* needed to do it well.

So, just what do meaning designers "make" anyway?

Good question. We're glad you asked.

The core task of meaning design is moment-making.

Our approach to helping you find more meaning in your life centers on moment-making, because moments are the essential element of the scandal of particularity. When you stop stressing about getting it all figured out or finally doing/having/making *enough* and fully embrace your human finitude—then you are free to deeply engage in and enjoy lots of particular experiences, each of which resides in a particular moment in time. Some of those moments are fleeting—like that green flash on the horizon at sunset. And some last for a bit longer—like that entire afternoon spent surfing when conditions were perfect and for no explicable reason you were the only one out that day. But long or short, the experience of the particular is momentary. Moments are all we've got, and thankfully they are more than enough, far more, if we design them well.

Making It Real

The machine shop used by our design students is called the PRL—the Product Realization Lab. We call it the PRL—not just *the shop*—to remind our students what a designer does. When a student walks into that room and sees the lathes, band saws, and mills, we don't want them thinking that what's going on in there is just turning, cutting, and grinding. We want them to see the PRL as the place where formless chunks of wood and steel get transformed into useful, beautiful, and practical things—it's where products get *real*-ized.

Real-ization is what design is all about.

The first product Dave made in the PRL as an undergraduate engineering student was a fire hydrant wrench. (Dave put himself through Stanford as a firefighter.) He walked in with a big chunk of brass in his backpack and hoped to eventually walk out with a custom-designed firefighter's tool. He made lots of mistakes. He bent the brass. He broke the cutters. He didn't know how to use the tools properly, and he didn't understand how to work with the materials. Eventually, he learned, and the wrench finally started to emerge from the brass billet. What Dave was doing in the PRL was learning how to make things, real-ize things, by carefully cooperating with the raw materials through the artful use of the right tool.

This quote, attributed to Michelangelo, beautifully and famously describes this idea of real-ization: "*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*"

That's what we're inviting you to do in becoming a meaning designer. This book's job is to give you the tools and techniques to craft and real-ize meaningful moments out of the rich raw material of the life you're already living every day. Our hope is to empower you to walk into the world where zillions of moments are laid out in front of you and show you how to make them real by artfully extracting the meaning lurking just below the surface.

A designer can make a meaningful moment two ways: by craft and by discovery. A crafted moment is one that you've conceived in advance and orchestrated to happen just as you intend in order to provide a meaningful experience. When you rise twenty minutes earlier than usual, at an hour when you know the house will be quiet, to sit in your favorite chair wrapped in your favorite throw blanket for your morning meditation sit—you've designed a crafted moment. When you collect affirmation cards from all the other team members and surprise Louise on her tenth anniversary working at your store with a carefully wrapped box full of those cards, you've crafted a moment.

Crafted moments are great. They have the advantage of often working just as you want them to. However, they take effort and planning, which costs time and energy, which are sometimes hard to come by.

A discovered moment is one that life is bringing you already, which you transform into a meaningful moment simply by how you engage with it. When you "make" a discovered moment, what you're making is your experience of it—you aren't making the moment itself. No advance planning is needed—only your attentiveness and readiness to seize the opportunity are required (which we will define as the design mindset of *availability*).

When you notice that the car next to yours at the red light is playing the same song on the radio as you are, and you roll down your window and flash the other driver a thumbs-up, which she notices, then you both smile at each other as the light turns green, and you pull away bathed in the heartwarming realization that "Nice, we *are* all in this together," you've done a very good piece of moment-making.

The Never-Ending Prototype

In meaning design, as in all design, prototyping is critical, but for moments, we do it a little differently. In every other design project, we iterate the prototyping until we finally happen upon a solution that is worth keeping, then we stop prototyping and implement that final design.

When we ask our Stanford teaching team to come up with a new course module, we often try five different prototypes of an exercise before we eventually land on a good one, are done, and move on. Most design projects are like this: After a lot of iterations, they reach a place called "done." But moment-making is different—it's never done, because the moments just keep coming.

There is no final product.

Even if you prototype a moment and live into that moment perfectly—it's gone in no time. In a moment. You can't keep moments, but you can keep a personal practice of making them.

The practice of being a moment designer is one approach to what people often call *living in the moment*. It is a particular practice that allows you to make meaning almost anywhere and at any time. Think of it as a sort of never-ending prototype. The good news is that being a moment designer is a great way to always be learning and improving your experience. Moment-making is a lifelong design project.

You are never done.

The point of the meaningful life is to keep living it—so why would you want to be "done" with that? Practices like moment design (and yoga and meditation) are never done, because the point of the practice is the doing and refining of it. You'll notice that most of the exercises we offer in this book for how to make meaningful moments, things like "putting on your wonder glasses" and "coherency sightings," aren't onetime activities. They are things you can do regularly and repeatedly, and in fact work best when they become part of a regular meaning design practice. And that's fabulous, because it means we will never run out of meaning-making moments. We will never long for more, because we will always have enough.

Once we've expanded our understanding of design thinking to focus on designing moment-making and have recognized that practices are really never-ending prototypes, it's time to address the most important aspect of thinking like a designer—your mindset.

The Designer's Way—Five Mindsets for Meaning-Making

There are certain ways of thinking that help designers to see the world a little bit

differently from how ordinary folks do. This is the way artists and designers see the world, and this out-of-the-box thinking tends to generate more creative outcomes than conventional in-the-box thinking. But you don't have to be an artist to think this way; anyone can do it. We outlined five design mindsets in our first book, and they are still relevant. But since we're designing for a different outcome in this book—not just designing one individual life but experiencing the joy and meaning held within the moments of our lives in community with everyone—the mindsets that get you thinking differently are a little different. The good news is that you don't need any previous experience with these mindsets or to have read any of our earlier books to use these mindsets to begin your journey.

Now, some of this might seem obvious to you because you already think this way. A lot of this stuff is intuitive. But in our teaching and in our writing, we try to make the intuitive explicit, because "if you can name it, you can claim it," and that makes it easier for you to remember it. With practice, these mindsets become habits. They become your way of thinking and seeing the world with all its wondrous possibilities and its delicious constraints, all the time. Collectively, we think of them as the Designer's Way. As you find the rhythm or pace for adopting them into your own life, they become your Way of doing things, your Way of being.

Wonder

In the final act of the Thornton Wilder play *Our Town*, the souls of townspeople who have died appear onstage chatting with one another, and the play's narrator, played as the Stage Manager, about the lives of the living. Emily was a young mother when she died, and looking back at the living, she was struck by how beautiful and wonderful everything in life really was, but she hadn't noticed. After tearfully remembering ticking clocks, her mama's sunflowers, food and coffee, new ironed dresses, hot baths, and waking up, she exclaims:

> EMILY: Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you! (*turning to the Stage Manager, she continues...*) Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?
> STAGE MANAGER: No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some.

Looking back on her life from eternity, Emily could see how plentiful wonder was. The happy news is that she's right—earth is wonder-full! And, more happy news, the Stage Manager is wrong. Catching more wonder needn't be just the province of saints and poets—those special kinds of people with an unusual capacity for noticing the myriad wondrous mysteries of this world. Even in a world full of lots to do, and an internet full of distractions, wonder is all around us and available all the time. Anyone can notice it; all it takes is to slow down for a moment and look for it. With some good design tools and a bit of practice, you can catch all the wonder that Emily unfortunately missed out on.

Wonder is the first and most important mindset. It is a fundamental viewpoint and an

approach to life that helps you notice the meaningful moments that make life wondrous! And when you go looking for wonder, you inevitably encounter the mysteries of the universe; the things you know are real but are beyond your understanding.

So, what is mystery, and why is it so important?

Pretty simple, really—a mystery is something you can experience and recognize, often together with other people, but for which you don't (yet, if ever) have a complete explanation. It's an experiential reality that's comprehensible, but not describable. The challenge with mystery is to let it be and not to get caught up in trying to understand it—literally trying to demystify it.

A classic example of a wonder-full moment is being caught up in the glory of a beautiful sunset. We've all had that experience—but it's no less wondrous for its commonality. An especially indelible sunset happened to Dave once while driving up the coast from Santa Cruz to San Francisco on the legendary California Highway 1. Dave drives this road all the time and has seen countless fabulous sunsets along the way. But one particular Thursday, the sunset was *astonishing*. Just south of Half Moon Bay, at four minutes before it was to set, the sun crossed a layer of clouds, and the sky utterly exploded into a chorus of red, orange, yellow, purple, and magenta—all laced with luminescent silver clouds. It was like those just unbelievable pictures in photography magazines, only far more intense. It was so gorgeous it hurt. Dave was so blown away, he had to stop the car. He got out and just gawked. And so did all the other drivers. In seconds, the highway came to a halt, and the shoulder was lined with people transfixed in the moment. After a few short minutes, it faded. When the sun finally hit the water and the spell broke, there was a short gasp of silence, then... a roar. All the watchers started clapping and jumping up and down, shouting, "W-H-O-O-O-A-A!!!" Then they all looked at one another with a strange intimacy born of just having had the same miraculous experience. The couple nearest Dave ran up to him, shouting, "Did you SEE THAT?! WOW, wasn't it AMAZING?!" After a few more flabbergasted exclamations, the guy gave Dave a high five, the woman gave him a big hug, and everyone got back in their cars and back on the road. That happened over twenty years ago, and it's as clear a memory for Dave today as it was that Thursday—and no less wonderful and mysterious.

It's a great example of wonder and mystery. Sure, we know why sunsets behave the way they do—why the longer path through the atmosphere at the horizon filters out the blues and greens and favors the red spectrum of sunlight. But that's not the mystery. The mystery is why does it so utterly arrest our attention and make us feel so alive and so bonded to the total stranger next to us? When Dave's award-winning Highway 1 sunset ended, people weren't running up to one another and saying, "Huh—that was weird. Do you know why the colors do that?" No one said, "Man, glad that's over and we can get back on the road!" What everyone experienced was a specific moment that activated awe and wonder. The beauty of that sunset, while amazing and glorious, was still just one particular moment of especially bright colors. But those particular colors in that moment touched the deep, universally shared human experience of beauty—and it transformed everyone who was willing to receive it. This refrain from the Noel Paul Stookey song "Miracles" captures it well.

Now a scientist may tell you how night turns into day,
But he can never take the wonder away.

Now, some people need to have an explanation for everything because mystery leaves them a little unsettled. But designers embrace ambiguity and mystery. We know that if you over-rationalize your world and try to explain the mysterious, you diminish the experience of it and risk missing the chance to let wonder into your life. To help make the process of finding wonder a little less mysterious, we've come up with an equation for it (after all—we have engineering degrees, too):

Curiosity + Mystery = Wonder

Curiosity is a prerequisite to wonder and is never more powerful than when it's directed toward mystery. Mystery is amazing by itself, and it is a reliable route to wonder and awe. The great news is that mystery is lying all over the place. All you need is your basic human curiosity and an openness to mystery. Wonder occurs when you let curiosity go as far as it wants to—so that you see deeply into the mystery latent in even the simplest things right in front of you. You find it in nature, you find it in science, music, art, and, for some people, in a spiritual or religious experience.

However you describe the experience of wonder, once you've been "there," you want to go back as often as possible. The mindset of wonder, of being open to real-izing this other nonrational world of mystery and experience, is intoxicating. When you accept mystery and approach the world with wonder, when you have the expectation that something wonderful is about to happen, along the Way, it often does.

Availability (Especially to the Particular)

The world is full of particular opportunities and experiences that can change our lives. These moments show up all the time, but only if you are *available* to them. It's an old adage that nothing happens until someone is ready, willing, and able. Adopting a mindset of availability just means your starting place is to be "ready and willing" for whatever comes next. This posture has the magical quality of suddenly creating all sorts of new possibilities for experiences and actions in the world. The Designer's Way invites you to attain a state of constant readiness for action by adopting a mindset of availability. Now if you're like a lot of people we've worked with, when you read that, you might respond...

"Wait! Did you just say 'a state of constant readiness for action'?"

"Yes, we did."

"Are you kidding?! That feels impossible! The place I'm in is a state of constantly barely being able to keep up. Just how and where am I supposed to find all this *availability*?"

We hear you. All these mindsets, and certainly availability, are aspirational. They are ways of living and being that we strive for but never fully attain—which is totally okay. Any time we can access these mindsets, even briefly or episodically, we have a better shot at successful moment-making. While adopting a mindset of availability continually may seem daunting if not impossible, accessing it momentarily can be refreshingly easy. One

of our colleagues, Annalise, related this story to us recently.

"I was working from home that day and was just logging off one Zoom meeting and logging on to another when I heard some noise behind me. I looked over my shoulder, and there was my ten-year-old deliriously diving into a pile of LEGO blocks. Just as I was about to say, 'Quiet!' I caught myself—then I waited and looked. There was my beautiful child in a moment of pure delight—and I got to see it. Then I clicked into the meeting."

That's availability in action. If Annalise can do it, you can, too.

Total availability may take a lifetime to attain, but occasionally being just a little bit more available is quite doable. All it takes is some intentionality and readiness to discover a doorway to lots of lovely experiences that are just waiting for you. Availability takes a leaning in posture that can jump-start good things happening—often without having to initiate them yourself. Being available doesn't require taking initiative; it just requires a readiness. This is great news especially for introverts who often struggle with making the first move.

Bill—who is pretty far down the line on the introvert scale—says one of his least favorite experiences—and probably yours, too, if you are like Bill—is being in a room with a whole bunch of strangers and being forced to make small talk. He just wants to crawl in a hole and hide. However, Bill finds that when he can inhabit the mindset of *availability* in these situations, something amazing happens. His body language changes, his crossed arms (a defense mechanism of introverts) drop, and his stance widens. He stops staring at the floor and instead scans the room. He "looks" more available. Better than that, his social anxiety all but disappears. He thinks this is because he doesn't feel forced to initiate anything and can just be and observe all the things that are happening around him. Bill is often delighted by the conversations that pop up spontaneously—he doesn't know why this happens but figures something about his body language and emotional state must signal that he's in an availability mindset. If you're like Bill (introverts unite), try *availability* the next time you face a tough social situation.

Do you know someone who just seems to have all the luck, for whom things just seem to fall in place easily and frequently? It turns out that high-availability people are luckier, too—and who doesn't want more luck? Now these folks aren't actually luckier than you, whatever that means, but studies of people who report themselves as lucky say they are most likely more available than the average. Research says that people who describe themselves as being lucky are in fact measurably more aware of the opportunities around them. They both see the possibilities (they're "ready") and are more open to responding to them (they're "willing") than others are—in other words, more available. This mindset allows them to find their way forward more easily, which gives them the appearance of "being lucky." Being available is, therefore, an incredibly valuable mindset for doing successful moment-making—because the only place and time you can practice availability along the Way is in the here and now.

In the moment.

Radical Acceptance

Radical acceptance is the mindset that sets you up for the full range of wonderful

possibilities in a life lived along the Designer's Way. Dave likes to say, "You can't solve a problem you're not willing to have." What he means is that while you may wish you were in a different situation, you aren't! To make a change or address a problem, you have to accept that it's your problem to solve. People fail far too often just because they are directing all their energies into wishing for a different reality or complaining about their current reality—none of which helps them design something that can improve that reality.

There are countless opportunities to apply this mindset, since the transformative power of radical acceptance always applies to reality—from the most trivial situations to the most impactful. Here's a common example that most of us can relate to. You're sitting on an airplane that has just backed away from the gate and is beginning to taxi out to the runway for takeoff when the plane suddenly stops and the captain announces, "Well, folks, I've got some bad news.... Looks like there's stormy weather brewing at the destination of the plane just ahead of us in line. Air traffic control has put that plane on a hold for at least forty minutes, so we're going to have to wait in line here a bit longer before we get underway. We'll keep you apprised as the situation unfolds." Everyone groans. Some of the passengers calmly accept the news, recline their seat, and open a book. But not everyone. The guy sitting two rows behind you is just not having it. "HEY! I didn't pay full fare for this kind of nonsense. Get this damn plane moving! Just pull around that other plane and get us off the ground. What kinda Mickey Mouse outfit is this airline anyway?!"

Arguing with reality doesn't change it. No matter how loud or adamant the guy in Seat 14B gets, he's not going to change the weather or speed up that plane. If he gets vociferous enough, he might earn the right to be removed from the plane by an air marshal (both Bill and Dave have been flying long enough to see that happen), but his noisy attempt at rejecting the situation changes nothing. He doesn't actually have the problem of "How can I speed up this plane?" The only problem that reality is offering for him to solve is "How would I like to use these extra forty minutes?" But he can't access a solution to the real problem (or make the most of the real opportunity) until he accepts the reality in which he finds himself.

Dave learned the power of radical acceptance in a much more significant way in early March 2020, when he and his wife, Claudia, suddenly learned she was terminally ill. Claudia was diagnosed with a very aggressive breast cancer and had as few as six but not more than twenty-four months to live. The news was devastating, but there was no arguing with it. Claudia realized that every day she spent in complaint or denial was at the expense of a day well lived. In less than a week, they figured out how to make the most of what time she had left, and she and Dave lived it to the fullest for the next nine months until her death in December. During those nine months, Claudia gave herself exactly one day to feel sorry for herself—to rant at what felt like a far-too-soon demise—then returned to making the most of it. Family and friends regularly spoke of her amazing courage and resolute approach to death. She saw it more simply: "It's not of my choosing, but it's true—so why waste the time?" Her practice of radical acceptance not only transformed her and Dave's life but made a huge impact on the hundreds of people

connected to them. Claudia reminded everyone that while living that year was hard, deciding how to was not. Radical acceptance was the only path to the best of whatever life had to offer.

Accepting the reality of your world, and accepting the constraints that reality imposes, is always the first step to designing your better future. Designers take a view of the world that is brutally realistic because a good design can only start in the actual real circumstances, even if those circumstances aren't "good" or "fair." This is sometimes misunderstood as capitulating or settling for things as they are, but that couldn't be further from what we mean. Accepting reality as it is, is not an endorsement of that reality. For instance, accepting that the world is full of inequality is not the same thing as endorsing it—not at all. You'll be more effective redesigning the situation if you understand and accept the reality of the circumstances on the ground and up front. Then you are set up for a more powerful reframe, a way of looking at reality that offers more options and the freedom to design solutions that are unique.

Radical acceptance is also a prerequisite to being present in the moment and finding wonder. If we want to design more meaning in our lives by more fully engaging and enjoying the moment we're in (do good moment-making), we can't get there by arguing with it, analyzing it, negotiating with it, wishing it were different, or complaining about it —all of which are responses that push us out of the moment and into our heads and our negative emotions. When people find themselves in a situation they don't like, they often say, "It's not fair, it's not what I had in mind."

Exactly.

We (all of us) do our best to make life work. We imagine a future and try to bring it into being. Then reality gets in the way and presents us a choice: to accept reality and enter into what is possible—or to reject it and keep living inside our heads, rattling around with that idea of ours that didn't work out.

Acceptance of reality is the only choice that can result in making meaning and finding our way to being fully alive.

To be present to a moment, which is how we can make meaning from it, we have to accept it. Doing that regularly, committing yourself to accepting reality as quickly as possible in every situation, is a radical act that can change your life. Whether it's as simple as a delayed flight or as crushing as a cancer diagnosis, radical and relentless acceptance is always the doorway leading to the life-giving path forward. Radical acceptance is a superpower mindset that gives you, the designer, access to more freedom and more creativity along the Way.

Fully Engaged and Calmly Detached

This approach to life suggests that a state of mind that is fully engaged but calmly detached is the best place from which to do design. When you are fully engaged in any task—really buckling down and getting the work done—you have the best chance of unlocking a great solution. However, most of us can't shake off the fear of a bad outcome, and this tends to stifle our creativity and burden our actions. But when you can cultivate a mindset that is detached from outcomes, which are ultimately out of your control, you

are the freest and most creative. When something goes as hoped for, you're pleased. When something unexpected or negative happens, you're bemused and happy to learn from the experience (which is why you come to think that just about everything is a prototype).

One of the most influential professors Bill encountered as an undergrad at Stanford was Professor Ron Howard (1934–2024). Professor Howard "invented" the field of decision analysis back in 1964. He developed a complex yet elegant way of assessing any decision as a series of quantifiable probabilities, thus allowing you to make the best possible decision when confronted with any question, big or small. One of his most important findings about good decision-making is contained in the inequality:

Quality of the Decision ≠ Quality of the Outcome

At first glance, this might seem wrong. "Of course good decisions lead to good outcomes, and bad decisions lead to bad ones—everybody knows that!" But actually, our lived experience tells us otherwise. Let's say that we are all attending one of Bill's Stanford lectures on discernment. After the lecture, Bill looks at his weather app and determines that it's a warm, sunny day out on the coast (the Pacific Ocean is only about thirty miles from the Stanford campus), and he invites the class to join him for "office hours on the beach." He and his students pile into their cars, only to discover that it's cold, foggy, and raining at the beach when they arrive. It's miserable, and they head home—no office hours today.

Did Bill make a bad decision? No, he made a good decision based on the best information available.

Clearly, something beyond his control, a sudden change in the weather, changed the "design constraints" of the problem, and Bill got a bad outcome. Should he be attached to this outcome? Should he hold himself responsible for the fog and cold? Should Bill hold the "Bill who made the decision with the information available at Stanford" responsible for the information that Bill received later in the day, once he got to the beach? Should Bill be responsible for information that is only available in the future?

Of course not. When you put it that way, it makes no sense to hold Bill accountable for information about the decision to go to the beach that was only available in the future.

Professor Howard's observation that decisions and outcomes are only connected by probabilities, and that you cannot control what is outside of your control, is critical to understanding this mindset. When you are fully engaged in your life and the decisions you make, you are exercising your agency, and when you are calmly detached from the outcomes, you are fully acknowledging the things that are out of your control. Here's the key thing to keep in mind: Engagement is all about your *activity*—your level of active participation in what you're doing—which is something over which you have total control. Detachment is all about the *outcome*, the end result of your activity—which is something over which you have very little control.

If you're finding the concept of detachment a little fuzzy, let's see if we can make it clearer by looking at it in operation in something as simple as a baseball game. Imagine

your neighbor has invited you to attend his kid's Little League baseball game. You go and witness the following: In the final inning, the team at bat is losing by one run. There are two outs. Suzanne is on second with Ellis on third, and Carlos is up to bat. The crowd is going crazy. As Carlos steps up to the plate, Suzanne's mom screams, "Don't blow this, Carlos—get Suzy and Ellis home or we'll lose!" Carlos's dad then calls out, "Just focus on the pitch, Carlos, and let the bat do the work. You've got this, buddy!" In that situation, Suzanne's mom is totally attached to the outcome of her daughter scoring and winning the game. Carlos's dad is calmly detached from those outcomes and is trying to help Carlos fully engage with the one thing he can do—try to get his bat on the ball. Carlos's best shot at having a good at-bat is to tap into his dad's calm and not pick up Suzy's mom's anxiety.

This mindset of being fully engaged and calmly detached is all about how you can direct your energies effectively with minimal wasted effort or emotion—it's simply smart personal resource management. By fully engaging in the design process, you direct all your attention and intention to the problem. When you replace anxiety about outcomes with calm detachment, you gain a big boost in energy, focus, and flow—all of which, paradoxically, lead to better outcomes. Fully engaged and calmly detached are the crucial ingredients for a more meaningful life.

Create Your World

Good designers don't ever accept the default reality or the default story, the one where life just happens to you and you take whatever comes along. When you are practicing the designer's mindsets, you are actively creating and cocreating your world, by yourself and with others. You are able to see patterns in what looks to others like a seemingly random collection of actions and information. You tune in to the process and the particularity of life's moments and are available to the possibilities of what's coming. When you can pull those elements together into a narrative about your life and future, you are actively involved in creating your world. Crafting that story and letting it inform and direct your perspective on life is empowering.

There's an old saying that "life is a story we tell ourselves," so taking responsibility for what story you are telling yourself and others can contribute mightily to how you actually experience the world. We don't mean living in a fantasy, which isn't helpful, but living into a thoughtful narrative that keeps you moving forward while giving you a leg up on processing and integrating whatever changes or surprises life brings you.

In our work at Stanford, we've seen a clear demonstration of the importance of knowing your personal story in the lives of first-generation students. All the students at Stanford are smart—really smart. But they come from a huge range of backgrounds and situations, and we have a significant number of first-gen students—people who are the first in their family of origin to ever attend a university. These students, while quite capable, are often less prepared and less resourced than other students from more college-ready circumstances. A common framing of a first-gen student's story is "I'm starting way behind, and I'll never catch up."

Extensive research has gone into identifying how best to help these students succeed.

It turns out that a single fifteen-minute intervention with one of these students in which (1) they learn the fact that determined hard work is a more reliable predictor of student success than level of prior advantage and during which (2) they are introduced to a successful student who comes from a similar background and can assure them that they can succeed has a strong positive impact that can last all the way through a four-year college experience and beyond. It doesn't matter that it was only fifteen minutes. What matters is that the student's personal narrative is redesigned—in a supportable and truthful way—to empower the individual to live more meaningfully and successfully. When "I'll never catch up" is rewritten into "I have a lot to accomplish, and I know how to do it," everything changes.

And it's not just first-gen students—it's all of us. Every one of us is telling ourselves a story about our lives every day. Designing that story carefully, responsibly, and generatively makes all the difference in the world. It's *your* story—so take charge of it.

The wise designer is an adaptive storyteller capable of weaving in new threads of the story as they appear. Creating your story, being proactive and positive about your future, is the natural next step from the mindset of availability, being ready and open to your present.

This mindset is how you create an intention for yourself, your family, and your community, and then how you turn that intention into action in the world. When you participate in the active creation of your world, you move *in flow* with the world you are trying to create. Then, when you create a story out of your journey, and radically accept the circumstances of your life, you are operating from a sense of abundance, and it is natural to invite others to join you. You live together, in community with other meaning designers, each pursuing their own lives along the Designer's Way.

Mindset Twofers

Individually, these mindsets are powerful, but they can become downright transformative when artfully combined. There are countless complementary ways to mix and match these five mindsets, but we want to bring your attention to two particularly generative pairs. These are the mindset twofers you really want working for you.

Mindset Twofer #1: Radical Acceptance and Availability

Radical acceptance and availability are the original power couple. Acceptance working by itself is good, but it doesn't necessarily compel you forward. A cool, measured acceptance might have you standing back to observe carefully before making a move prematurely. Exercising prudence is good, but prudence can easily grow into reticence, which breeds inertia or even skepticism—and we don't want that. Availability adopts a leaning-in posture that is not merely open (*willing*) but open with a positive inclination to generative action (*ready*). The accepting and available person is poised beautifully—adopting an objective recognition of reality and doing so with a positive readiness to respond—but not an overreadiness that might jump the gun prematurely. A practiced designer who can attain an accepting and available mindset is in a perfect place to make

the most of almost any situation.

Just ask Arne.

Arne is a ninety-year-old, single, wheelchair-bound, largely unsung artist living on a fixed income in a spartan studio in an artist collective in a warehouse in downtown Atlanta. None of those descriptors are of Arne's choosing, except for the studio in the artist collective. Arne used to be a globetrotting, happily romanced, financially patroned man-about-town—a real raconteur. Much has changed as he's aged. At first glance, you might think Arne is stuck in a sad life. You'd be wrong. Arne is the most vibrant, alive, engaged, and enthusiastic person you've ever met. As his circumstances and his health have declined, he has radically accepted every hit and every loss. It's just the new reality, the new baseline from which to keep living into what remains. He spends zero energy complaining about or even dwelling on his losses and constraints—which are sizable and numerous! The secret to his successful super-capacity of acceptance is his commitment to relentless availability. Were he merely accepting, he'd be sitting quietly in his studio apartment, calmly enduring the very little going on and tolerating the nowhere to go. The loneliness, boredom, and emptiness would eventually be overwhelming and claw him toward despair. But that never happened. Regardless of what he's lost, Arne's focus is entirely on what he does have and what may come of it. A lifelong painter, musician, and teacher of filmmaking, he has a deep love of the arts. So—with all this new free time and little distraction (being bound to his wheelchair in his apartment hour after hour), he's finally free to read more deeply! He reads two or three books a week, preferably long and difficult books—to which he can finally give time and attention. When Bill walked into Arne's apartment a few months ago, the first thing he said was, "Omigosh, Bill! Have you read BALZAC?! He's amazing—sit down, we *have* to talk about this book!" He isn't just reading to pass the time, he's *available* to the fullest possible experience of reading. He's relishing the craft of writing, analyzing various styles, utterly reveling in and savoring the power of story and the drama of history. He's really *into it*!

That's the difference availability makes. Rather than resist or struggle against the world as it is and what he's had to give up—such as being able to go out on his own during the day—Arne takes the resource freed by his acceptance and leans into it in a new, generative way. Arne wonderfully demonstrates the Designer's Way as he combines acceptance with availability (not merely resignation—which is often as far as acceptance goes). When acceptance and availability combine, it's transformative. Let them work for you, too.

Mindset Twofer #2: Availability and Wonder

Availability naturally combines with wonder to allow much-improved access to meaningful moment-making. When these mindsets are held in tandem, you are engaging the world by saying, "Okay, life, I'm ready... for wonder!" Wonder becomes the valence of your availability—it's the direction that availability is leaning toward. Arne's story shows us how; he loves to play the harpsichord and has one in his studio. He loves how it sounds and how the keys feel, so he's glad of the chance to play it more. Having tired of the pieces he knew, he started trying something he'd never done before—improvising. All he wanted was to play *something*, so he just wheeled over to the keyboard and started playing

whatever his fingers wanted to play. He was making himself *available* to the instrument and the untapped skills his hands possessed. With time, he developed a unique, free-form improv style and loved it! He was playing a kind of sound he'd not heard before. As he let himself fall deeply into the wonder of this new sound, he could play himself into a trancelike meditation experience that could last for hours. A visitor asked what he was playing lately, and when Arne demonstrated a bit of his new improv, the visitor was astonished at the sounds and remarked, "Wow—I've never heard anything like *that* before! Can I bring some friends over to listen to you?" And suddenly, Arne's experience of wonder was multiplied. Arne's availability to the harpsichord transformed his homebound-ness into a totally new experience of wonder that the younger, less constrained Arne would never have discovered.

There is wonder lying right below the surface of our lives if we, like Arne, can just be available to it. The next time you are at the farmers market, be more available to the colors and smells of all the fresh fruits and vegetables surrounding you. Wonder at the variety and ask yourself, *Who are the amazing humans who grew this abundance, and where did all of this amazing food come from?* Or on one of your daily walks or runs, be available to the sounds of the environment passing by and feel how your feet propel you through space. Wonder at the springiness of your running shoes and ask yourself, *What designer designed these shoes, and how did they make them feel so good?*

Having the readiness of your availability tuned to wonder's frequency can reap big dividends in becoming more fully alive. Don't miss it.

A Becoming

If these five mindsets collectively define the Designer's Way—just where is it we're on our way to? Where is this way taking us?

It's taking us on the journey of becoming.

Our favorite definition of the human person is *a becoming*. We frequently hear people who get stuck arguing about whether they feel more like a human *be*-ing or a human *do*-ing. They see this issue as a zero-sum game they can't win. The more you do, the less you become. These fundamental concepts about who you really are compete with one another, and finding a balance can seem impossible.

In this straightforward, generative model, you start with who you are ("*Be*") and go out into the world and do stuff ("*Do*") as coherently as you can. As you are doing stuff (engaging with the world), you reflect on your engagements and take them to heart to grow into becoming your further evolved self ("*Become*"). The new you that you've *become* (your new "*Be*") starts all over doing new stuff, and the process continues.

We are all humans in the process of *becoming*—becoming more human, becoming more our authentic selves, and becoming more adept at making the most of life along the way.

When you change the way you think, adopt new mindsets, and open yourself up to thinking like a designer, and you invest in the cycle of *becoming* the next better version of yourself, you are well on your way to designing more meaning in life, for yourself and

everyone you meet.

TRY STUFF

We're still building up our foundation for our meaning-making project, but let's see if we can't start making it work for us immediately. As an initial exercise, let's try out one of the Mindset Twofers: radical acceptance and availability.

Exercise: Choose Life

How to let radical acceptance and availability transform any (or every) day.

Bill has a favorite daily practice that he developed out of this work and that he uses to start every day. While he's shaving, he says two things to himself out loud (it's very important to say it out loud, because then you're much more likely to believe yourself, which is crucial to make this practice work).

Day Start Statement #1: "I live in the best of all possible worlds."
Day Start Statement #2: "Everything I do today, I choose to do."

Now Bill realizes this may sound a little delusional, because we all know the world in general is messed up in myriad ways. And our world specifically may not even be close to our definition of what *best* looks like. And each of us has had long days of drudgery where it feels like we have no choice about how to spend our time.

We get it.

We aren't promoting magical thinking or toxic positivity. But given the choice of starting his day lamenting the evils of the world and his must-do list or adopting the designer's mindset of *create your world*—Bill chooses to create his world.

Because words matter.

Bill stating that he lives in the best of all possible worlds establishes a positive availability bias—it tilts him toward all the good potential in front of him today. Bill could just as easily say, "I live in the worst of all possible worlds," or "I live in the world."

All three versions are or could be equally true, but the mindsets are profoundly different. A lot of positive psychology research has demonstrated that by starting the day with the true and positively biased "best of all possible worlds," you put the power of availability to work for you and literally increase your probability of having positive experiences.

The second statement announces that you are in charge of what you decide to do. It doesn't mean that you are in control of the day—not at all. All sorts of unplanned crap happens in Bill's day and probably yours, too. But by "choosing into" the day, you accept the day about to unfold, before it's even started. It gets your acceptance out on the table immediately, which, when combined with your availability, completely frees you to get the most out of the day you are about to live. This practice is simply you choosing your attitude toward your life—intentionally, explicitly.

How does this work in reality?

Imagine starting your day with these two affirming statements. Then off you go to work. You jump on the D14 bus like always, and eighteen minutes into your forty-three-minute commute, the bus gets a flat. "What?! Buses don't get flats, do they?" Well, yours just did. The driver tells everyone to get off the bus and wait on the sidewalk while he assesses the situation. While everyone else is immediately getting upset and yelling at the driver (which helps tremendously), you have the following conversation with yourself: *Gosh, why didn't I just drive today? Then none of this would be happening! Oh, wait—I chose to take the bus to reduce the stress of driving every day and to buy some extra reading time. That was a great decision; it just didn't work out that way today. Hmmm… So, do I really live in the best possible world? Well, yes! I guess I do if I live in a world where buses almost never get flats, and I've never been stranded by a bus before. In fact, I live in a world of incredibly reliable buses 99 percent of the time.*

As this occurs to you, you notice that your fellow passengers do not seem to be having the same realization as you are. Most of them are either arguing with one another or yelling something into their cell phones. You order an Uber, which will still take twelve minutes since it's peak rush hour, and you realize you get that extra reading time you were hoping for. The only difference between you and the dozen unhappy people all around you is that you took the Designer's Way of acceptance and availability this morning by doing your choosing life practice—and living into it.

Exercise: The *Got To–Get To* **Reversal**

Here's a very simple yet powerful way to implement the twofer of acceptance and availability. All you have to do is replace *got to* with *get to* when you describe what you're already about to do. If you're in a *got to* situation, there's no room for you to accept the task or activity, and you act like a victim of circumstance. When you *get to* do something, it is easy and natural to be available for the task or activity. You choose to want to participate.

Like we said, the words really matter.

So, instead of "*I've got to* attend another meeting," you reframe it as "Hey, these people want me to be part of their conversation. Isn't it great *I get to* be a part of what they're working on?"

Instead of "*I've got to* get my information to my tax guy this week or he won't have time to finish by April 15, and I'm going to pay a late penalty again!" you reframe it as "I'm sure lucky that *I get to* have the kind of income and investments that my taxes require the services of an accountant. I need to remember to get him what he needs on time so he can help me."

You'll find with a little practice that you can shift almost any *got to* into a *get to*. Give it a try and see how this small move can result in a big positive shift in your day. Eventually, you will find that all you need to do to accomplish the transformation is change that one vowel:

"I've got to redo the budget" becomes "I get to redo the budget."

"I've got to be the one to tell Mom that Dad has dementia" becomes "I get to be the one who tells Mom that Dad has dementia."

"I've got to get up with the sun to catch that early flight to Newark" becomes "I get to get up with the sun to catch that early flight to Newark."

Try it—you're just a vowel away from a more meaningful experience.

Exercise: Reframing Ladder (Practicing Radical Acceptance)

Radical acceptance includes *seeing* things as they really are, *naming* your reality without built-in judgment or bias, and fully *embracing* that reality. When all three are accomplished, you are approaching truly radical acceptance.

This exercise is designed to get you from resistance to acceptance using a real personal dilemma, problem, or situation to work on, and a tool we call the *reframing ladder*. Bill learned this from his mentor at Stanford, Professor Bernie Roth. The goal of the reframing ladder is to develop a practice of looking at your problems, particularly one that you've been stuck on for a while, in a way that starts to generate lots of solutions.

This exercise is supercharged by the mindset of fully engaged and calmly detached. It works better if: 1) it's a real problem and you have skin in the game (engagement), and 2) you can let go of your current perspective and see the problem afresh (detachment).

The technique is to start with a problem and see if, by moving up the reframing ladder two or three times, you can come up with a new perspective and some new solutions, thereby becoming unstuck!

Start by coming up with a problem that is real and juicy and alive for you right now, but one that you've been stuck on for a while. Frame the problem using the sentence stem: *How might I…*

How might I… get a better work-life balance?

How might I… make more money while still having time to spend with my family?

How might I… align my work with my values?

Pick one of your most interesting and perplexing personal problems, one you are excited about but are the most stuck on. Put that problem on the bottom rung of the ladder. In this case, let's use a real example from a client that Bill is coaching; we will call him Robert. Robert is a mid-career professional who is starting to burn out at work. He wanted meaning and purpose in his job, but as he made more money and had more people to manage, he felt further and further away from his core values. "The money and the influence I have as a senior manager is great, but I don't feel the value of my job anymore—I think I've accidently become a bureaucrat."

When he came to Bill, Robert had already started to work on his problem and had drafted a problem statement that read: "*How might I…* align the job I do with my values?" Bill realized that Robert was assuming that the "alignment" he was seeking was going to come from changing something about his job. Robert wasn't thinking more broadly about his life. Bill suggested that, as they worked with the reframing ladder, they change the word *job* to the word *work*. This

would open up more possibilities for what might come up. Robert agreed to try it.

Step 1

Begin by populating Rung #1. The first rung of Robert's ladder had this slightly modified statement: "How might I… align the *work* I do with my values?"

LIMIT	
RUNG #3	
RUNG #2	
RUNG #1 *How might I…* align the work I do with my values?	

Step 2

Now, moving up the ladder one rung, you transform your problem to the next rung on the ladder. The transformation question starts with this sentence stem: "*What would I get if…*"

In this case, the sentence becomes:

Q: *What would I get if…* I aligned the work I do with my values?

Now come up with three answers to this question. In this example, three different answers to the question might be:

1. I'd feel more energized about what I'm doing at work.
2. I could tell my friends that I'm not so bummed out all the time.
3. I'd feel like I could connect my work to something meaningful in the world.

Now you take that answer and turn it into the Rung #2 question. Robert picked answer #3 as the one he was the most excited about, and turned it into Rung #2's *How might I…* question.

"*How might I…* connect my work to something meaningful in the world?"

Put this question on Rung #2.

LIMIT	
RUNG #3	
RUNG #2 *How might I…* connect work to something meaningful in the world?	
RUNG #1 *How might I…* align my work with my values?	

Step 3

Okay, we might already be to a place where we could come up with some interesting new ideas, we are getting close to a reframe that might get us unstuck, but let's go up one more rung on the ladder just for fun.

Q: *What would I get if…* I connected work to something meaningful in the world?

Three brainstorming answers:

1. I'd be able to explain to my friends how I made my job more fulfilling.
2. I would engage with a community of people who cared about sustainability.
3. I could start a side hustle consulting on the subjects that I am an expert in.

Now, using one of these answers, construct your new problem as a *How might I…* question on Rung #3.

Robert picked answer #2 and created the new Rung #3 *How might I…* statement.

Q: *How might I…* engage with a community of people who care about sustainability?

How Might I Statements…for Brainstorming	
RUNG #3 *How might I…* engage with a community of people who care about sustainability?	
RUNG #2 *How might I…* connect what I'm doing at work to something with real meaning in the world?	
RUNG #1 *How might I…* align my work with my values?	

Both Rungs #2 and #3 create a new solution space—one that is much larger than the original problem. Brainstorming with these *How might I…* statements will yield new and surprising results.

This reframing exercise led Robert to a very productive brainstorm that included looking into some industry groups in his field (which would lead to more connection) that promoted sustainable industry practices (one of his core values). It also opened him up to a wide range of possible prototypes, things he could try right away. He could connect with NGOs, governmental and nongovernmental standards groups, and industry associations, all of which worked in areas that fit his criteria of values alignment. Robert came up with the idea of creating an organization that matched career mentors to students interested in sustainability and pitched it to his boss. Robert subsequently redesigned part of his job to include running a high-impact youth-mentoring organization, mentoring the next generation of sustainability leaders.

It's a win-win-win.

Remember, at each step up the ladder, we came up with three ideas to "solve" the problem statement. The outcome would have been very different if we'd taken another path "up the ladder." That's okay; it's even a feature of the technique. If for some reason you are not getting more and more ideas as you move up the ladder—choose a different path.

The reframing ladder is a way of practicing radical acceptance. It allows you to unpack a problem, includes really *seeing* things as they are, forces you to *name and rename* your reality without a built-in bias, and lets you *embrace* your reality fully.

Climb the ladder to radical acceptance and get unstuck.

(WARNING: Bernie also taught Bill to never go more than three rungs up the ladder. People who go too far up the ladder end up quitting the world, shaving their heads, and staring at the sun all day. This tool is that powerful—consider yourself warned.)

	Transactional	Flow
Focus	outcomes	experiences
Task	problem-solving	moment-making
Action	reaching-directing	receiving-recognizing
Orientation	self	beyond self
Role	activist	participant

Description 3

Description 4

random things happen, triggering other random things, often with unknown or unpredictable outcomes, is the world most of us live in most of the time and the world many people live in all the time. Your job in this world is to process all these transactions efficiently and with as few errors as possible. Get the kids to school, go to work, buy the groceries, please the boss, plan for retirement, solve the energy crisis (Dave hasn't given up on this)—all good things to do and all "transactions." This default reality works because, most of the time, transactions are all we need to get by. In fact, evolution would be highly selective for a transactional intelligence. See the tiger—run from the tiger. Have a baby—protect the baby. Catch the deer—eat the deer. Don't want to run out of oil—invent electric cars. Transactions work. They are fundamental to surviving. But they can be anathema to thriving, because our focus in the transactional world is on what's about to come next in order to ensure we get the right outcome (safe babies, deer-burgers, affordable e-cars) and the kind of thriving, full aliveness we're after is only found in the present moment. Transactions, while necessary, continually take us out of the present and into the future. Joy, meaning, and aliveness only exist in the immediacy of the present moment. Not what happens next or what happened before.

We want you to have it both ways. You can have it both ways. You need not only experience the world of transactions. We want you to regularly experience another deeper, richer world, right here, right now, in what is almost like a parallel reality.

Flow

Whether you've heard of *flow* before or not, most of us have had the experience of being *in flow*. We've all plunged so deeply into a task—polishing a must-win proposal, perfecting a loved one's favorite dish, or hammering cross-court winners—that the world fades, our focus sharpens, and when we finally surface, we're startled to see how many hours have slipped away. Flow was first formally defined in 1990 in the seminal book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (MEE-hy CHEEK-sent-mee-HAH-yee), the world-renowned researcher and cofounder with Martin Seligman of the field of positive psychology. This research describes flow as a psychological state in which an individual experiences some or all of the following:

- total immersion in what they are doing
- time standing still
- complete concentration and focus
- full awareness of and responsiveness to other direct participants in the situation (most commonly observed in team sports)
- an incredible sense of satisfaction during the experience—even euphoria

Flow shows up when the challenge at hand matches your abilities—no harder, no easier. The task can be simple or sophisticated; what matters is that your skills and their demands lock into equilibrium, pulling your full attention into the moment. Hit that sweet spot, and flow can happen anywhere. Bill goes into flow chopping onions for

dinner, Dave on his sailboat with a good breeze. Flow is perhaps best known in the world of sports where it's frequently referred to as "being in the zone."

People often reported that being in a state of flow felt meaningful afterward. In his 1990 classic, Csikszentmihalyi wrote about flow and meaning-making, stating:

> The flow experience... is not "good" in an absolute sense. It is good only in that it has the potential to make life more rich, intense, and meaningful.

It's important to note that in this definition, flow is not a place you go, it's a psychological state you enter when you deeply engage in some specific activity. So how do we get from Csikszentmihalyi's idea of the *flow state* to our idea of a *flow world*?

We suggest that the reason people find the flow state meaningful is not necessarily because the activity is important or world-impacting (chopping onions does help get dinner on the table, but thinner onions are never going to save the world or imbue great meaning on an outcome). The person in flow is fully present to what they're doing (chopping carefully and precisely), and they're fully present to their situation, surroundings, and circumstances (the knife, the cutting board, the onion, the light on the counter). That combination focuses the energies and attention of the person on the immediate reality in which the activity is taking place, which allows magic to happen—the magic of an intense *experience of being alive—of being human*. It is this sense of full aliveness and full humanness in the moment that makes the state of flow inherently meaningful.

As Joseph Campbell famously said in *The Power of Myth* film series:

> People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is... [to] actually feel the rapture of being alive.

Remember our distinction between impact and meaning. *Impact* is an outcome. *Meaning* is how we experience our felt response to an encounter that matters to us. The flow state is inherently meaningful because of the purity of aliveness we experience in it—as Campbell puts it—*the rapture of being alive*.

The Flow World

So, here's the new idea—the place that the flow *state* comes from is the flow *world*.

The flow world is the process of everything happening in a particular moment. It's the whole river of reality that is coursing underneath, around, and within us all the time. It's always going on, everywhere, over there, and right here. The conversation you're in. The breeze blowing through the window. The quantum probabilities bouncing around in your lap at the subatomic level. The expanding cosmos. The physical transformation of the cookies baking in the oven. The *state of flow* is experienced when a person fully participates in their particular place in the *flow world* at the present moment. And that last part is important—the flow world is only accessible in the present moment. This is a critical distinction between the flow world and the transactional world.

In the transactional world, everything we're doing and focused on is understood in terms of the past or the future: How did we get here? Do we have everything we need? Is everyone present? Is this going to work? When will we finish? Is it good enough? Now what do I do?

In the transactional world, the outcome is everything—but the outcome typically lives in the future, which is not where we in fact are living. We are in the present. So, the transactional world is constantly pushing us out of the present and redirecting us to an imagined future. We have developed incredibly sophisticated approaches to navigating the transactional world—from AI-optimized to-do lists, to smart ovens that know your lasagna better than you do, to team collaboration software to get more done faster—and those techniques have been undeniably successful. So successful that we use them all the time, but with the unfortunate side effect of never actually being a full participant in the present moment because we're so focused on what's next.

This is also a hint as to why so many people feel as though their lives just aren't meaningful *enough*. When you define impact as your primary form of meaning, then you have to get it in the transactional world, where you're focused on that next thing you're working toward, and it's always in the future. When you do have success and see impact, it's over as soon as it arrives. The goal has been met, but you are no longer making that impact—it's been made. So, you aren't doing anything meaningful anymore and you've got to get back out there and make more impact. Get back on the wheel and run, run, run—because you're never done, it's never enough, and you will never actually get anywhere, and certainly not to the mythical *there* you think you are running toward.

It's exactly the opposite in the flow world, where the present moment is all there is, and all it offers is a chance to fully participate in it. In the flow world, there's always enough, because each moment is its own reward, as is the one after that and the one after that.

One more reason tapping into the flow world is so meaningful is because it's transcendent. Now, we don't want to go all woo-woo on you, and this isn't a book about spirituality (at least not like most of the spiritual books we know), but we have to introduce the idea of transcendency because it's an important—and thankfully normal—aspect of life in the flow world. Remember Maslow's last insight was that the way to find meaning and experience the fullness of being human is through self-transcendence—getting beyond yourself. There are two ways that life in the flow world contributes to transcendency: timelessness and interconnectedness.

The flow world is always encountered in the present moment, which effectively makes it eternal—not eternal in the sense of lots and lots of time or happening on some alternate astral plane but eternal in the sense of time*lessness*. It's always now o'clock in the flow world, so when you are fully there, fully "in the now," your experience has a timeless, eternal quality to it. People have a paradoxical experience of time in the flow world. They report that time both stood still and seemed to go on forever. The experience felt like it lasted for a long, long time and yet was over in a flash. When in the flow world, and experiencing a flow state, we are so engaged in the moment that we become self-forgetting. This frees us to experience the timelessness and full aliveness of that moment

—which is one common form of self-transcendence.

Flow also invites us to experience interconnectedness. A very commonly reported aspect of being in flow is having a sense of everything all being part of one big unity. This is easily seen when a sports team collectively goes into flow and every player feels completely connected to and synchronized with every other player—moving effortlessly and harmoniously together. This can happen because we are all in fact interconnected to one another. The latest thinking in neuroscience, best characterized in the work of Dr. Dan Siegel, founder of the Mindsight Institute and former clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, is that we aren't just autonomous, separate selves bumping into external entities and forces. Human consciousness is not just a collection of electrical impulses inside our skulls but extends into a network with the other people around us. So, when we experience that our personhood, the humanity of each one of us, is in fact larger than our individual selves, we become more human, and life gets more meaningful. The flow world is the place where we can have encounters that make that interconnectedness real.

You may have noticed that most of what we just said about how we can attain a degree of self-transcendency through the timelessness and interconnectedness found in flow was in relation to being in the flow *state*—that special psychological state that is at least infrequent if not elusive. Must you enter a full-blown flow state for these benefits to unfold? Not at all. While an intense episode of being in flow allows for a more powerful experience of meaningful transcendency, it isn't an all-or-nothing deal. We firmly believe that all encounters of the flow world are life-giving. We'll develop this idea more fully in chapter 6, but we think any time spent in the flow world is time well spent. And you don't have to pull out your yoga mat or book a weekend at the retreat center to get there. The flow world is a mere glance away. Slow down when tasting that next sip of coffee instead of just gulping through it—it won't cost you a second of time, and those coffee beans gave their lives to make that moment in yours. Once you get the hang of tapping into it, you are well on your way to designing a life full of meaning.

Playing a Different Game

Life in the flow world is quite different from life in the transactional world. Remember, both worlds are present all the time—the difference is how you experience them. We can illustrate this with something as simple as two versions of the same hypothetical workday morning routine—one lived entirely in the transactional world, and one that includes the flow world as well.

Imagine Fritz, a thirty-eight-year-old financial analyst working in a midsize regional bank. He lives in the city in a ground-floor apartment, still loves to skateboard, and has a girlfriend—Haley. No pets. He's got a big presentation this afternoon. Here's how his morning goes, living entirely in the transactional world. At 6:30 a.m., his cell phone alarm goes off, and after the buzzer, he hears his own voice (recorded the night before using his custom alarm app) barking, "Dude—today's the day, get your game on!" He sits up, grabs his phone to check his messages, and notices an Amazon notification. Looks like his new

skateboard wheels got delivered last night—he'd better grab 'em before they get swiped. He pops into the bathroom, hits the hot water to get it warming up, and rushes out the front door to find the box of wheels. "Whew—they're still here." He grabs the box, tosses it on the table, and makes for the bathroom. He wipes the steam off the mirror and starts shaving—and starts rehearsing his presentation. Again. (Hey, you can't be too ready!) It's a suit-and-tie day, so he just eats an energy bar to avoid messing up the outfit, which gives him time to page through his slides again. At 7:45, he jumps in the car and speed-dials Aron, the department admin. No answer; it goes to voicemail. Again. "Aron, it's Fritz—be sure the handouts are printed and on the conference table by eleven, before the meeting starts. I'll confirm when I get in." He hangs up and thinks, *You can never be too careful with Aron—better text as well to be sure the message gets through.* It's an important day, so Fritz splurges and parks in the expensive lot in the basement of his building. En route to his desk, he spies Aron, who sees him first and says, "Got your messages—all of them. The handouts were ready last night. Happy now?"

"Yeah," Fritz mutters as he heads to his office. "Thanks."

He doesn't see Aron shake his head in disgust behind him.

Now let's try that again with Fritz still attending to his transactional-world obligations but tapping into the flow world as well. At 6:30 a.m., his cell alarm goes off, set to play his favorite song, "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran. He pauses to listen to it once through before rolling out of bed—just long enough to relish the first time he and Haley heard that song. Having read the research that says going outdoors first thing in the day before going online can reduce anxiety and increase energy, he lets the song finish, slides on his slippers, and walks out to grab a gulp of air. He takes a big sniff. "Wow, the air tastes great at this hour." He notices an Amazon package on the porch. "Sweet—must be my new wheels," he says, waving at a dog-walker as he scoops up the box and heads inside. It's a suit-and-tie day, so he makes breakfast before dressing, lest he make a mess of himself. Scrambled eggs with a bit of yogurt on the side seems like the right fuel for a big day like this. After breakfast, he heads to the bathroom and starts shaving. He notices it's kind of interesting how the feel of the razor changes with each stroke as the water temperature rises. The goofy look of being covered in shaving foam makes him smirk, which he recognizes in the mirror as the face that always made his mom say, "That's my boy! There's my Fritzie!" He'll have to call her tonight to tell her how the big day went; she'd love that (and he would, too). After dressing, he grabs his phone—no urgent messages—and heads to the car. He recorded his run-through of the presentation last night, so he plays it back during the drive to groove it in his mind one more time. It's good. He's got this. He parks in the usual lot and walks the two blocks to the office, taking the path through the park. One of the trees is turning colors, which sparks an idea for a transition metaphor he can easily add to spruce up his talk. When he gets in, he passes Aron and asks, "We all good for today?"

"Absolutely," Aron says. "Had it all wrapped up last night."

"Well done again, man, thanks!"

"Hey, I'm getting a refresh on coffee—bring you one?"

"Definitely, much appreciated," Fritz replies as he turns into his office.

The only difference between these two mornings is which world Fritz chooses to be in

and what mindsets he adopts when he gets there. These two very different morning routines take the same amount of Fritz's time but deliver very different experiences. In the second, Fritz is still getting his job done—arguably, getting it done better and more efficiently—but he's also tapping into the flow world along the way. He's getting more out of his morning without having to cram more into it (and without giving anything up in the bargain). He gets to enjoy a favorite song and a lovely memory. He starts the day connecting to the real world and nature, not fixated on his phone, which enables him to be fully engaged and calmly detached. He prepares carefully but not compulsively, which leaves enough emotional availability to remember to care about his mom (which will do them both good later that evening).

The all-transactional Fritz isn't a bad guy. His morning was a complete success in his eyes—it was a "normal" morning, and the feedback he got from it told him that it worked just fine. He felt prepared, he took care of business, he made sure Aron did his job, he avoided his wheels being stolen off the porch—all good, right? Yes. And no. All-transaction Fritz literally doesn't know what he's missing, because he was never in the flow world where what he's missing lives. The sweet song, the mom memory, the dog-walker greeting, and most certainly Aron's offer to get him a coffee were all entirely out of view. *That's* the reason we're offering you this reframe and why we're writing this book. The transactional world is necessary and good, and we can't live without it, but it's not the whole world, and it won't evoke the whole you.

The transactional world is so self-referencing and self-contained that it will never, on its own, remember to invite you to partake of the flow world. It just can't. It's so preoccupied with getting things done that it will always direct every ounce of your time and energy to more, better, faster outcomes. The first step to making more meaningful moments in the flow world is recognizing that it's there, then turning your attention toward it.

The key difference here is you. *You're different* when you orient yourself to one world or the other. What you're focused on, where your attention is directed, is different. The primary task you are doing is different. The kind of action you're taking—whether your energies are largely outbound or inbound—is different. Your awareness of and orientation to yourself and others is different. And how you play your role in the world is different. This chart shows just how different they are. But remember—as different as those lists are, these two worlds are always present. They are very near to one another, and with time and practice, you'll be able to move between them easily and rather quickly.

Another way to think about the chart above is that when you're in the flow world, you're playing a different game. Which raises the question: What game is that?

We both admire the work of the modern philosopher James Carse. Carse was a professor of history and the literature of religion at New York University, and his seminal work was a little book titled *Finite and Infinite Games*. In it, he uses the metaphor of "games" to characterize the whole set of rules, behaviors, and goals that define and motivate different people's approach to living life. By modelling life as a game, Carse isn't trivializing it; he's merely applying a simplifying analogy to help people understand their own lives and choose thoughtfully and intentionally how to live into them.

Carse says there are two fundamentally different games people play: finite games and infinite games. In finite games, you play by the rules in order to win. In infinite games, you play with the rules in order to keep playing. We probably like his model because it fits so well with ours. You play finite games in the transactional world, and you play infinite games in the flow world.

Don't Miss It

Dave got his first clear introduction to how different and yet how intimately overlapping the transactional and flow worlds were when he was in his mid-twenties, just two years out of college. Dave's failed attempt to solve the energy crisis included a brief stint with a start-up. Two forward-thinking oil company executives broke out of their firm to start an "advanced energy strategy consultancy" to bring efficient power generation innovation to heavy industry. They hired Dave as their bright, young (meaning *inexpensive*) engineer to do the dirty work. The company was way ahead of its time and ultimately failed, but they had one shining moment along the way.

Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), the Northern California electric utility company, hired Dave's firm to do a research project analyzing the potential for power conservation at their biggest customers' industrial sites. Dave helped prepare the proposal and even got to be a part of the pitch presentation to the client. Minutes after the meeting, when Dave and his boss Paul had just stepped out of PG&E headquarters onto the sidewalk on Beale Street in downtown San Francisco, his boss got a call informing them they had won the contract! They were both ecstatic—but not for the same reasons.

Dave said, "Hey, this is great! If this contract goes well, then maybe PG&E will endorse us to their industrial users, and if that happens, then maybe some of those industrial users will ask us to overhaul their power conservation plans, and then maybe, just maybe, we'll get hired to actually design and install one of those new cogeneration power units, and *then* we will really be doing it!"

Paul looked at him, a little confused, and replied, "Well... sure, that'd be great, Dave, but that's a lot of ifs and a long way off. What I got out of today was how fun it was to be in that conversation with those guys and how gratifying it is that PG&E trusts us to do this work. This is going to be a really fun project, and I can't wait to get started!"

As soon as Paul said that, Dave stopped dead in his tracks on the sidewalk and just stared straight ahead. He felt like someone had hit him in the head with a two-by-four. It suddenly dawned on him that he and his boss had both just come out of the exact same meeting in the exact same room with the exact same people saying the exact same things, but they'd each had a totally different experience. Dave was stuck trying to win the finite game of growing a bigger company. Paul wanted that, too, but his focus was almost entirely on enjoying the chance to play the infinite game of doing some good work with some good people. The only reason Dave was happy was because this new contract put one little checkmark on the big project plan in his head. All that this award meant to Dave was that the probability of hitting a strategic objective a year or two from now (which never happened, by the way) might be a little more likely to occur than it was a few hours

ago.

Meanwhile, Paul was having a fabulous day right now. He'd had a great time giving the presentation and enjoyed every bit of the meeting to the fullest. Even his enthusiasm about the future was entirely different—he was looking forward to what they were actually going to be *doing*, starting immediately. He wasn't fantasizing about some imagined far-off future. When Dave looked at Paul, he recognized that Paul was on a different planet than he was—despite just being a few steps ahead of him on the sidewalk. Dave didn't have words for it at the time, but he was living in the transactional world playing a finite game and Paul was living in the flow world playing an infinite game—at the same time and place, and in the middle of the same conversation.

It was clear to Dave that Paul was having a far better time in that other world than Dave was having in his world. He wasn't sure what to do about it then, but he knew he had to figure out how to get more of what Paul was getting.

Mind Games

You may be asking if this construct of distinguishing between the flow world and the transactional world is just that—a mental construct. Is it all just in our heads? Yes, of course it is. The flow world and the transactional world are real worlds, and they are also a perception-reframing tool that we recommend you use to give yourself a better chance at designing a life with more meaning IN it.

As we've said before, design only works in reality, so good designers are realists. And ultimately, there is just one all-inclusive world, or universe, or multiverse (we're pretty sure it's a multiverse, but we digress). Whatever the whole cosmic enchilada really is, it's one reality. But our brains and bodies are far smaller than that totality, and we can't possibly perceive or understand it all. Furthermore, we have far more capacities to think and observe and respond and move and act than we can possibly activate at one time. So, in every moment of every day, we must pick and choose which of our many powers to use and which little corner of reality we're going to aim those powers at. Neuroscience now knows that our brains are organized very efficiently to always leverage as much of our huge but finite capacity as possible. One of the tricks the brain uses to do that is pattern matching—noticing how things are familiar and similar to what's already in our memory banks so we don't have to rethink them all over again.

Accordingly, we now know that we don't really see what we're looking *at*; we see what we're looking *for*. Let's use that fact to our advantage for designing a more meaningful life. By adopting practices and mindsets that enhance the frequency and intensity of flow-world encounters, we can re-habituate our transaction-oriented brains to be more receptive to and better recognize the flow world and the rich possibilities that await us there. This conceptual construct of the transactional world and the flow world is simply a tool that helps us orient our brains in such a way to optimize access to different kinds of experiences. The transactional and flow worlds are both part of reality, and they're both present everywhere all the time, but we're not equally aware of them. Each one corresponds to a different brain mode, which we can learn to master.

Two Brains Are Better Than One

Many neuroscientists are exploring how the brain functions and what various networks of neurons actually do. New insights are revealing more about how our brains and bodies work together, almost every day. Particularly relevant for our purposes is the research of Lisa Miller, a tenured professor and director of the Clinical Psychology Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Miller is also the founder and director of the Spirituality Mind Body Institute, the first Ivy League graduate program and research institute in spirituality and psychology. In her latest book, *The Awakened Brain*, Dr. Miller identifies two distinct ways or modalities in which our brains work, which she calls the "achieving brain" and the "awakened brain."

The achieving brain is just that—it optimizes our ability to organize people and resources, accomplish tasks, and achieve results. The achieving brain is running just about everything in the modern world. But because it's focused on trying to control lots of moving parts and people—things not easily controlled—the achieving brain is also anxious, restless, judgmental, and rarely, if ever, satisfied.

Sounds like a brain focused in the transactional world to us.

The awakened brain is focused more on the present moment, relationships, and emotional well-being. It exhibits higher levels of neurotransmitters like oxytocin and serotonin, which are linked to feelings of love, compassion, and well-being. Dr. Miller observes that regardless of their religious or spiritual orientation, people operating out of their awakened brains experience a sense of connectedness and a form of spirituality.

Sounds like a brain fully in the flow world to us.

We both use both our brains all the time, and wouldn't leave home without either of them. In fact, Dave has had this poem by Rudyard Kipling over his desk for more than forty years.

What we're observing in today's accelerating sense of meaninglessness is that far too many people have lost one side of their heads. They have far too little access to their awakened brains, and it's costing them dearly. If that's you, please know we have designed ways for you to get into the flow world, where you can get the awakened side of your head back. After all—two heads *are* better than one, two brains are better than one, and two worlds are definitely better than one.

How to Be in Two Places at Once

Now that we've introduced you to the transactional and flow worlds, the last thing we want is for you to think that you have to choose between them. That's a terrible idea, but it's what lots of highly regarded advice givers are telling you all the time. The efficiency experts and the management consultants will give you lots of advice and countless smartphone apps to help you be a superstar performer in the transactional world. Meanwhile, the meditation specialists and yoga gurus and retreat center directors can't wait to help you disconnect from all the noise and drop deep down to get in touch with the flow world. They all mean well, and their advice and tools and techniques work, but

unfortunately, most of their advice expects you to be totally engaged in just one world or the other, and to stay there for extended periods of time so that you can make progress and build momentum.

We completely understand their rationale. Many of the exercises in this book are designed to be done just while in the flow world, and there are good reasons for that, which we'll explain in the coming chapters. But no one can live in just the flow world, and while lots of people are living in just the transactional world, they're not happy there. So, we have to find a way to live in both worlds. And that means getting good at moving back and forth between them, and it means learning how to be in both at the same time (or almost). And that brings us to one of our favorite design thinking tips and tricks: Set the bar low and clear it.

The problem with all this high-performance transaction stuff and all this super-deep flow stuff is it sets the bar too high. We're not designing tools for Olympic transactionalists or Oscar-winning flow masters. We're designing for regular people with regular lives who have two tons of transactions to get through every day—one ton at work and another ton at home with a nasty commute to transact in between. Remember that prototype iteration is central to being a designer. A good prototype is quick and easy and helps us learn something as we try it. "Set the bar low and clear it" is just our simple way of reminding people to do good design. So, we want to help you set the bar low and clear it when designing for meaning, too.

Sure, some of our tools are All-Flow-All-the-Time tools—like Put on Your Wonder Glasses or the Seventh-Day Reflection. And some are quick wins that you can grab on the fly—like the Coherency Sightings Log (chapter 5) or Take a Sniffari (chapter 6). But in the long run, what we're inviting you to do is simply recognize both worlds and be attentive to tapping into a little more flow world when you can. The goal is just to be more like the second version of Fritz than the first version of Fritz. You don't actually need an exercise or a technique for this at all. You just need to have both your heads available when you need them.

For instance, during a staff meeting.

You know what a staff meeting looks like (even if you've never been to one, you've seen scores of them in the movies). Nine people gather around a table in a conference room. There's a printed agenda with about 118 minutes of stuff that we're supposed to get through in an hour. Alice, the manager, arrives six minutes late, fuming from the exec staff meeting she just came from where she learned the team's budget got cut—again. And so, the meeting starts. Some announcements, some status updates from various members of the team. One big, serious discussion about how the new offering from our big competitor may change things for our company (or store, or nonprofit, or soccer team). If you just drift along with the crowd, you'll have a totally normal transactional experience. You'll be interested in what matters to you, and bored and annoyed when the meeting seems to waste your time on trivialities or things that don't concern you. You'll take note of who's gaining ground and who's falling behind. Then you'll get back to work. All good transactional observations. You're good at this. You know how the game is played.

You can keep doing it that way, and nothing will go wrong. You'll be an effective member of your team and things will just keep going the way that things go. Or... you can change it up. During those many moments in any staff meeting when not much is happening and your full attention isn't required, you can shift into the flow world. All you have to do is stop and look. Now, in order to "look," you have to know what you're looking for, which in this case is the flow world. But just how do we stop seeing the thing we're currently seeing (the transactional world) and suddenly notice this other world (the flow world) that a minute ago was apparently invisible to us?

Good question. Here's a shortcut to help you recognize which world is which and make the shift between them when you want to. *The transactional world is the world of intent.* It's all about what you and others are trying to accomplish—what you *intend* to have happen. Therefore, everything is seen solely through its relationship to aiding or impeding your effort to produce that outcome. *The flow world is the world of is.* It's all about what is actually happening right *now*—regardless of future (or past) implications thereof. Therefore, everything is seen just for what it is. In the transactional world, things only have instrumental value—based on how they contribute to your goals. In the flow world, things have intrinsic value—based on what they are. So, the key to shifting into the flow world is to shift from seeing the world as you're *intending* it to be and seeing it just *as it is* (and over time, growing the capacity to see just what is—more and more fully and deeply).

So, let's get back to our staff meeting and see if we can pull this off in real life. As you're sitting there at the conference table next to your colleagues, for just a moment, stop thinking about whatever "next thing" is currently being discussed (like the budget change or the revised advertising campaign) and look at what's in front of you *in this particular moment and in this particular place with these particular people*. It can be as simple as changing the question on the screen in your head from "What's Next?" to "What's Happening Right Now?"

You ask yourself, *What's happening?* and then, with a quick scan of the room, any one of the following observations could instantly transport you to the flow world:

- Wow—that tree in the parking lot has amazing fall colors.
- Something is really bothering Susan today. She's unhappy—no, she's scared.
- The team isn't upset by the budget cut, but the boss doesn't realize that—if only she knew that we know we can deal with it—but everyone's just complaining.

Your awakened brain can recognize these three things going on in the flow world right in front of you in just a few seconds—far less time than it took to read them. Each of these observations represents a different kind of invitation to engage in the flow world. Responding to the tree is the easiest. All you have to do is receive its beauty and enjoy it. Don't be critical that you don't have time to sit under it all morning and ponder the universe—that's transactional thinking. Just let that little ray of joy from the tree zip right into your soul and warm you with the reminder that in nature, beauty is plentiful and unstoppable—how great is that?

Susan is another matter. You have a number of options here. You don't really know what's going on with her, and you don't want to be presumptuous, so perhaps best to just drop it. Even if you do only that—simply allow yourself to care about her for a moment, to have some sympathy for whatever it is she's in the midst of, then let it go—you are being more human in that moment, and that's a more meaningful way to live. Or you could decide to speak to her later that day. You won't make a big deal of it, but you'll keep an eye out for a moment when you might mention, "Hey, during staff today, you seemed a bit down or maybe a little stressed. Everything okay with you?" That approach leaves her plenty of room to skip it. ("Oh no, everything's fine. I've just had it with these constant budget changes.") It also gives Susan the chance to connect more meaningfully with someone at work if she chooses to. Either way, you've designed a few more flow-world moments and done so at almost no cost to you whatsoever.

The last observation—your sudden sense that everyone on the team is ready to step up to dealing with the budget cut and they have the boss's back, but the boss doesn't know that—is one of those situations where the flow world just might invade the transactional world. If that was your intuition, you could hold it for a little while and just keep scanning the room to see if the intuition persists. If it does, and the opportunity presented itself, you could speak up and say, "You know, Alice, I agree that this round of budget cuts isn't necessary, but we're stuck with it. And I, for one, am confident we can find a way to recalibrate our projects without any devastating impacts. I'm curious, how does everyone else feel?" Then you wait and see how people respond. If your intuition was right, others will chime in supportively like you, potentially resulting in a huge act of support for Alice that could change not only her demeanor that day but how the whole team experience may feel for the next few weeks.

Yes, there's some risk involved in speaking up this way, but it's not a big risk. And if you take that risk and it succeeds, your flow-world observations could become a catalyst to improving life in the transactional world. If you're unsure about speaking up, then don't take the risk. There's no harm done by just observing carefully. But do let yourself ask the question *What's happening?* and do make those flow-world observations if only to allow you to have some more meaningful moments during that meeting or any meeting.

This simple, pedestrian example shows that it is quite doable to design a way to be in two places at once, to navigate both the transactional and the flow worlds at (almost) the same time with just a bit of well-directed attention and intention. The staff meeting won't take any longer. The budget cuts will still be dealt with (and very likely dealt with more effectively). You can get more out of a staff meeting without having to cram more into it—and it's surprisingly easy to do.

WARNING: The Practice-to-Production Trap

Lots of perfectly good practices aimed at helping people access flow-world experiences are being subtly co-opted by the transactional world. The two most common examples are the twenty-minute morning meditation sit and the evening gratitude exercise. The

morning meditation practice is intended to help you get centered and at peace to help sustain your ongoing commitment to being your better self and to enter the day generatively. The evening gratitude exercise (listing three things you're grateful for at the end of each day) is intended to help you be more aware of the good things in your life and to set your mind in a positive posture as you go to sleep, so you will rest well and rise in a generous frame of mind. These are terrific practices, evolved from wisdom traditions going back millennia and affirmed by modern positive psychology. They provide great benefit to millions daily.

So, what's the problem? The problem is that it's incredibly easy to let them become just another transaction—but entering the flow world should never land on your to-do list. Since the transactional world is up and running all the time and everywhere, it tends to be pretty imperialistic. It will volunteer to take over almost anything. It does that with good intentions; it's just trying to do a good job of running the world and creating lots of good outcomes.

Transactional-world thinking looks at a flow-world experience and immediately assesses what beneficial results or outcomes reside there. It wants to maximize those results. Before you know it, your flow-world activity is no longer focused on fully participating in the present moment; it's working toward better performance and better results. All you have to do is let your orientation shift from the present moment experience (the actual meditation itself or the actual day of your gratitude reflection) to the future results or performance. When your flow-world practice slides surreptitiously into a transactional-world performance, it sounds like this:

- Well, that was a good meditation, but I gotta find a way to get to that deeper place faster.
- This gratitude list is okay, but I think yesterday's list was better.
- The peace from my meditation didn't last past lunch today—I guess I need to up it to thirty minutes and work harder at getting more peaceful.

That last one really tells the story.

What's happening there is what was intended to be a *practice* subtly morphed into a *production*. The minute you start worrying about outcome is the exact moment you have landed in the transactional world.

Earlier, we described a practice as a never-ending prototype, where the goal is the doing of it—not the result or the outcome. Our achieving brains, spurred by the huge momentum of the incredibly demanding transactional world, are infinitely clever at transforming anything into an outcome-oriented production—a transaction. Flow world–related practices (like meditation and the gratitude exercise) are *intrinsically* beneficial by their very doing, and doing again, and doing again. Transactional outcomes are *instrumentally* valuable by their completion contributing to a desired goal or result. When you're meditating just to put enough mindfulness in your tank to get you through your stressful day, you're turning your meditation into a transaction. You're just stopping at the mindfulness gas station on the way to work, or the good dreams gas station on your

way to bed.

The flow world is not the fuel to propel you through the transactional world.

Doing flow-world things in a transactional way will "work" in terms of pursuing your transactional goals and will still provide some flow-world benefits, but it won't bring you the full meaning and aliveness it could if you kept those practices in the flow world, in the particular moments where they belong. It's a subtle struggle. Of course we want to grow in our ability and capacity for living into the flow world more, but be aware (and beware) of letting the transactional world steal your flow-world experiences and practices. And when it happens to you (and it will—we all do it), be kind to yourself and just start again.

Let's Go

So there you have it—two different worlds in which to operate (where you can play two different games using your two different brains) and that give you a whole bunch of new territory in which to design more meaning. Combined with a reframed perspective on what meaning is (far more than just making an impact) and a powerful set of six designer's mindsets, you are ready to start designing.

In the next four chapters, we will illustrate how to get into the flow world and make moments rich with meaning with specific design exercises and practices you can do immediately. Those four areas are:

- Wonder
- Coherence
- Flow
- Formative community

Designing for more meaning in our lives while learning to navigate between two worlds doesn't mean we aren't going to struggle or have to work hard to pay our bills or provide for our families. People who experience meaningful lives still get laid off. They fall in love, get divorced, and fall in love again. They get sick, they lose friends and family to cancer and disease, just like everyone.

But for the most part, these folks experience meaning and purpose in the day-to-day process of life. They have found ways to access the flow world while still getting done what needs getting done in the transactional world.

And if they can do it, so can you.

TRY STUFF

We'll be providing more exercises in the coming chapters. The big idea in this chapter is all about developing the ability to both recognize and engage with *both* the transactional and flow worlds. Below is a simple tool that can help you to do just what those stories illustrate.

Exercise: Flip the World Switch

The idea of this exercise is simply to attune our attention to the two worlds and to improve our facility in moving between them. It should be easy, as both the flow and transactional worlds are present at all times. Since our goal in "flipping the switch" is just to practice our two-world awareness, it's best to pick a situation or a moment that's simple and uncomplicated.

The Steps

- Select the situation in which you're going to flip the world switch.
- Enter that situation in your usual transactional orientation, but consciously ready to flip at some point.
- Notice carefully what the transaction is and how it's going.
- Partway into the experience, say *FLIP!* loudly in your mind (silently in the room).
- Immediately look for something in the flow world in the present moment that can hold your attention.
- Attend to that and that alone for ten seconds while still doing what you're doing, with no visible change being noticeable to any bystander.
- Then again say *FLIP!* loudly in your mind (and silently in the room).
- Refocus on what's next in the transactional world.
- Continue on your way.
- Congratulate yourself for being a world flipper.
- Optional: Later—after the situation has passed—reflect on "What was that like?"

Example: Preparing Dinner

- Walking into the kitchen where your partner is starting dinner, you offer, "How can I help?"
- Your partner says, "Why don't you get everything together for the salad?"
- You say okay to your partner and *I'm going to FLIP this* to yourself.
- You get the lettuce, tomatoes, and Parmesan cheese out of the fridge and start working.
- You notice that you have to decide what to cut up first, where to put the pile of each salad component, what ratio of lettuce to tomatoes, and wonder what kind of dressing will go well with these elements.

- You decide tearing up lettuce is step 1 but are so distracted by the dressing issue that you drop the head of lettuce on the floor.
- While stooping to pick up the lettuce, you say *FLIP!* and look for the flow world.
- You see the lettuce in your hands and are amazed at how the leaves fold into one another and how subtly the green color changes from tip to stem. “Whoa—who knew lettuce was beautiful!?”
- Your partner asks, “How’s it going over there, honey?”
- You say *FLIP!* to yourself and say, “Great! I was just noticing how pretty lettuce really is. It’s so pretty it deserves the right dressing, don’t you think? What should we use?”
- Partner: “Huh—yeah, it *is* pretty. How about just oil and vinegar, then we can actually taste the lettuce for once.”
- You: “Cool. Done.”
- You congratulate yourself on not just finishing the salad but enjoying its beauty as well.

4

simply denying that mystery exists, we think that cultivating receptivity to mystery is a generative way to frame our common human experience.

Years ago, Dave was having a conversation with Lawrence—one of his consulting clients who was a self-described very smart and scientifically minded person.

Lawrence: If it can't be accurately quantified and empirically measured, it doesn't exist.
Dave: Really? That's quite a statement. You sure about that?
Lawrence: Absolutely—anything else is just nonsense.
Dave: What about love? We can know it, and we universally value it, but we can't empirically measure it.
Lawrence: Doesn't exist. It's just your imagination.
Dave: Oh, now that you mention it, we can't measure imagination either. How about that?
Lawrence: Now you're just bothering me.

Lawrence had made a choice to deny anything in his experience that he couldn't rationalize and understand, and because of that, he doesn't allow mystery to be part of his everyday life experience. He pays no attention to it. And that is unfortunate, because Lawrence is living in a diminished world—a disenchanted world where he has allowed his curiosity to atrophy, and mystery has been buried under a mountain of rationalizations. And because his rational mind, the mind that talks all the time, is the only form of intelligence that he has access to (emotional, kinesthetic, and intuitive intelligences are some of the others), he has cut off the possibility of recognizing any other forms of information, rational or nonrational, that are available in this universe, all the time. In addition to living a diminished life, Lawrence has stopped learning.

We want to be exceptionally clear here: We are not saying you have to believe in anything supernatural or weird in order to experience mystery. Bill's worldview is mostly a scientific one; he was a physics major for a time in college, and some think science is the ultimate anti-mystery point of view. Yet it doesn't take much study of biology before you come across the mystery of life emerging from a primordial soup of chemicals. Or see the magic of the human stem cell—able to self-renew and, under the right cues, give rise to every specialized cell type that builds the organs of the human body. Modern physics and cosmology, aided by supercolliders and the James Webb Space Telescope, has revealed a universe even more mysterious than we ever imagined. Supermassive black holes, quantum uncertainty, particle superposition, and quantum entanglement—which Einstein called "spooky action at a distance"—it's all kinds of crazy mysterious. The essential fabric of the world is nutty and wonderful at the same time. It turns out that science, as it generates verifiable knowledge, also creates the next frontiers of mystery, so we are never without the next question, "Why?"

Enter with an Open Mind

To let a little mystery into your life, you just need to be honest with yourself, trust your perception, including the perceptions and feelings you can't explain, and adopt the designer's mindset of wonder when experiencing the world. Once you have that orientation to your experiences, you will probably conclude that you have already felt things that are mysterious. Things you know are true but are beyond your capacity to explain.

When we encounter something we know to be real but can't understand, as designers, we don't push it away—we embrace it. Rather than dismissing our perception as "false" or "in error," designers approach the mystery of the human condition with an open mind. We don't interrogate the experience or try to define it. By definition, you can't get a lot of information, at least rational, verifiable information about a mystery. Instead, when you are thinking like a designer, you learn to appreciate and engage with the mysterious, adopting an attitude of letting the in-the-moment mystery just Be.

When we lean into mystery with curiosity, we activate the possibility of a larger and more meaningful learning experience, and we evoke the Wonder Formula.

Curiosity + Mystery = Wonder

Moments of wonder are everywhere once you know what to look for. They are always found in the particular moment, scandalous as that may be, and frequently act as a gateway from the transactional world to the flow world. And these moments of wonder, also called *awe* and *transcendence*, have been regarded and recorded in the human experience throughout history.

We regularly encourage our students to "pursue latent wonderfulness" as they leave Stanford and head out into the world. We define *latent wonderfulness* as "the 20 percent chance that something in a new experience might lead to learning, joy, or wonder." Radically accepting the world the way it is (remembering always that accepting is not the same as endorsing) and having the readiness of your availability tuned to wonder's frequency can reap big dividends. It is one of the most dependable paths to becoming more fully alive.

Many modern historians have commented on the similarities that are found in the world's oldest myths and religions. In most traditions, one story shows up again and again—ordinary people report having surprisingly similar experiences of transcendental, out-of-body moments of wonder. In these rare but powerful moments, there is always a heightened sense of awareness, of the availability to wonder. In this elevated state of wonder, people often describe a sensation of the universe as one, unified, living thing in which the boundaries between themselves and everything else dissolves into thin air. This experience of oneness evokes a deep feeling of connection to nature and all people everywhere.

A profound feeling of wonder.

It doesn't seem to matter what belief system or culture you come from—the stories of experiencing awe and wonder are everywhere. Different cultures and traditions wrap this experience in varied explanations and metaphors, but there seems to be something in the

evolution of human consciousness that allows for these experiences. And they're hardly rare.

In a 2023 Pew Research Center survey study of more than eleven thousand Americans, 83 percent say they believe that we have a soul or a spirit, and 45 percent of people feel a "strong connection with something beyond this world." Thirty percent say they have "personally encountered" a spirit. And perhaps even more significant is the fact that 46 percent of those surveyed feel a deep sense of connection to an encounter of wonder at the unfathomable mystery of the universe.

Since this data comes from a US population, steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the cultural explanation for these mysterious experiences is "spirit and spiritual." The same data interpreted in the Buddhist tradition might substitute the Tao, or the Way, for the term *spirit*. Animistic religions, shamanism, and other Indigenous people's worldviews might substitute nature or Gaia for spirit. No matter your culture or tradition, thousands of years of recorded human experience confirm a pervasive sense that reality is far richer than what meets the eye—and that humans have available to them the experience of transcendence and wonder.

Recent neuroscience research highlights the benefits of experiencing awe and wonder. Studies using fMRI show that awe promotes a sense of connection to the world, reducing feelings of self-importance and fostering altruistic behaviors. These findings suggest that nurturing awe can improve mental health and well-being. Awe also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing stress. Additionally, awe can increase oxytocin release, fostering social bonding and a sense of interconnectedness.

Our conclusion is that this state of mind, in response to experiences of wonder evoked by mystery, must somehow have evolved in our species and is a powerful way to experience more than just the transactional world. And if wonder/awe/transcendence (Maslow's ultimate top of the pyramid, where meaning is found) are good for us, the question is: How do we make more wonder in our everyday reality? How does the wonder mindset work in real life, and are there reliable ways to get more of it?

Remember that wonder is connected to the scandal of particularity—wonder occurs in singular moments of intense observation. And wonder helps facilitate the shift from the transactional world to the flow world. Therefore, in order to experience more wonder in our lives, we must be willing to let go of the transactions we are in the middle of, for just a moment, and pay close attention to what is available right now.

We live in a difficult time when it comes to our attention. It feels like everything, and particularly our devices and screens, want all our attention all the time. Some have called this the "attention economy" because our phones and particularly social media apps are carefully designed to keep us hooked and staying on the screen just a little bit longer. Even worse, social media apps monetize your attention and sell your data while they keep you scrolling, clicking, and paying attention to their feeds, whether it is good for you or not. These apps are insidious—who hasn't found themselves going to sleep an hour later than intended after scrolling through countless videos, TikToks, or Reels that will never be remembered in the morning?

It will take some discipline and focus if we are going to find wonder in a world of

ubiquitous attention theft. But it is possible.

For instance, let's say that you've decided to practice the mindset of wonder, so you go outside to a little piece of nature, perhaps a garden. Gardens are perfect for attentive observation. Packed with diverse life, they offer a target-rich setting where close study of nature becomes a multidimensional, multisensory, and truly wondrous experience. In that same Pew Research study, nearly half of Americans said they believe nature carries its own spirits or spiritual energy. So, sitting in a comfortable outdoor chair, you might first look at the garden with the question "What do I need to do here?" and a list of actions pops up almost without effort. "I need to pull those weeds over there, I need to deadhead those Shasta daisies, it's time to fertilize the roses," and so on and so on. When you look at the garden this way, what you see is a series of actions and transactions that need doing. And notice that all the tasks are projections of yourself into a future that hasn't happened yet. The weeds will get pulled *in the future*; the roses will get tended to *in the future*. Notice that you are spending very little time in the present moment in the garden with this transactional mindset.

But let's say we adopt a mindset of curiosity. What changes? First, our perception of things starts to change. "Look at that California poppy over there. I didn't plant that; I wonder where it came from? And how does it make such an intense color? There is just one daffodil left. I wonder why it bloomed so late? There are spots on the rose petals; (looking closer) there are aphids all over the leaves, so that must be the cause, (looking closer), but there are three ladybugs on the stem. I think they like to eat aphids... and I wonder what eats ladybugs..."

And so on.

When you are curious, you don't tend to see things *to do*; you just notice things *as they are*. When you get really good at curiosity, the tendency to turn your observations into tasks evaporates and you are confronted with the intrinsic *is-ness* of the world. The volunteer poppy *is* beautiful, the color so rich that it *is* astonishing, and the circle of life created by the rose-aphid-ladybug system *is* amazing. And you notice that all these observations are about things in the garden as they stand, *now*! The poppy is beautiful—*now*—the process of bug life and death is occurring—*now*! Your attention has moved from *tasks to be completed in the future* to the *here and now*. Your curiosity has brought you into the moment, and you begin to shift from the transactional world to the flow world.

Then let's say you decide to go deeper, past curiosity and into the world perceived through the lens of wonder. You notice the amazing spiral pattern of petals on the rose you were looking at. You notice that it's not just one color of red, that the word *red* is just a stand-in for the more complete and complex experience of the rose, the petals, and the pink-red-burgundy mélange of redness the rose contains. You marvel at the geometric perfection of overlapping rose petals and contemplate the mystery of the unfolding, from bud to fully deployed rose-ness, and wonder at the energies and processes that make it happen. You are now fully present in the infinite moment of now, all because of this simple and infinitely complicated rose. It's scandalous, because it's this particular rose, on this particular day, and no other moment will be this moment.

After a moment, you pull back to "reality" and notice that you have spent a timeless moment in flow, marveling at the mystery of the beauty contained in a single rose. You notice how different that in-the-moment experience of wonder felt—how time seemed to stop, and how your attention was clear and focused on the experience of beauty. That moment of wondrous beauty became suddenly available to you the instant you decided to pay attention to it. And, unlike the mindless night-scrolling in bed, you will later remember it and perhaps even be able to re-create and savor it.

A key part of the experience is letting go of our labels—the quick words we use as shorthand for objects and experiences—and truly seeing what's in front of us. Robert Irwin, one of Bill's favorite artists, had a biography written about him titled *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Things One Sees*. That is how designers look at things—they see beyond the words and labels that we commonly use to describe things. Neuroscience has long known that our brains, to be more efficient, are powerful pattern-matching machines. The brain quickly tries to recognize what you're seeing as something for which it already has a memory or a model, so it can move on to do other things. When we recognize and apply a name to something—"Oh, it's a rose"—we stop attending to it, which means we stop observing it. To see something deeply and fully in a way that will evoke its potential wonder, we have to get past the names of things and really see them as they are beyond their label. It is with this Designer's Way of seeing that we can fully enter the flow of direct experience.

That's why we say that the mindset of wonder is always available—and the flow world is always here, humming just beneath everyday awareness. By seeing directly what is in front of us, without labels, we tap into the flow world. By acknowledging the mystery of nature, we take a stance, we see and start paying attention to a world that is more generative, more alive, and more life-giving.

Who wouldn't want this experience of more wonder in their lives?

The painter Robert Henri in his book *The Art Spirit* describes this attentive and appreciative way of engaging the world as attaining "that marvelous state that makes art inevitable." Agreeing with Robert and taking his idea one step further, we believe that all of us—not just artists—are invited by wonder to that marvelous state that makes meaning inevitable.

Bottom line: When you encounter a mystery and the chance to catch the wonder it unleashes, when you are invited to that marvelous state that makes meaning inevitable—whatever you do, don't miss it.

TRY STUFF

EXERCISE: Put on Your Wonder Glasses

The American author and playwright Henry Miller said, "I have a theory that the moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself. I have tried this experiment a thousand times and I have never been disappointed."

The crucial line in this quote is "I have tried this experiment a thousand times and I have never been disappointed." This is seeing like a designer (or a writer—who designs with words) with an activated wonder mindset. And Miller is right—something wondrous awaits you anytime and anyplace when you enter into the flow world with mystery-appreciating curiosity.

It's this Designer's Way perspective that opens up the bevy of wonder-filled opportunities lying in wait for us, just around the corner in the flow world. What you want to do is train yourself to find these moments of wonder in all the little nooks and corners of life. By the way, if we deeply practice the mindset of availability, we sometimes experience peak moments of transcendent wonder, really big aha moments. Combine this with fully engaged and calmly detached and you might reach a state of alternative consciousness known in Taoism as *wu wei. Wu wei* is often translated as either "nonaction," but more accurately, it represents a state of "effortless action" or "action without force." This is the state of perfect balance and harmony with the world. Christians might call this a *state of grace*—living in alignment with divine purpose, not striving. Whatever we call these altered states, and they are terrific if you have one, they're fairly rare—even for a well-trained designer.

We've designed this exercise to help you see wonder-inducing mystery all over the place. Remember that the transactional world and flow world are just versions of very different and available modes of perception, both depending on whether we're operating out of our achieving brains (that see the transactional world) or our awakened brains (that see the flow world). The truth, of course, is that there is only one reality happening at any one time, and transactions and flow sit side by side in our experience. But we can't perceive everything all at once, so our brains help us out by defaulting to the achieving, transactional brain—it makes life more manageable in the day-to-day world. The problem is that modern life is so driven by the transactional mind that we need tricks and tools to make the flow-world experience more available.

The point of this exercise is to provide a readily accessible route to the flow world to allow us to enjoy the mindset of wonder whenever we want to. Therefore, this is an exercise in noticing what is going on all around you, all the time. To do these exercises well, you need to be in a quiet, enjoyable place, perhaps a comfortable room in your house—or better yet, out in nature, in a place where you feel safe. We are going to use our imagination to observe and notice the world through three different sets of glasses, labeled *NORMAL, CURIOSITY*, and *WONDER*.

Step 0—Get Set: Pick a time and place where you can spend a few uninterrupted minutes observing the world around you. A quiet place where you won't be interrupted is good; a place with a lot of stuff around, a visually complex space, is great. It can be indoors or outside, but in our experience, this exercise works a little better somewhere in nature. The random complexity you see in nature helps avoid distraction (no cell phones, please) and engage your perception more fully.

Step 1—Put on Your Normal Glasses: With your Normal Glasses on, survey what's in front of you, holding the question "What do I need to do here?" in mind (i.e., look with your normal transactional perspective to figure out what problems or opportunities you notice in the scene). Don't make any decisions;

just notice what possible actions come to mind and let a to-do list form in your mind as you do so. After you complete your scan, close your eyes and notice the to-do list that your brain has formed.

Spend two to three minutes with those Normal Glasses on, noticing and making lists, and then put the list you made to the side and say to yourself, "Gosh, I sure am good at coming up with things to do! But I don't have to actually do any of these things, at least not right now. So I'm going to put this list away, stop thinking about things to do in the future, and take another look to see what I may have missed."

Step 2—Put on Your Curiosity Glasses: With the curiosity of your three-year-old-self mind, put on your Curiosity Glasses, open your eyes, and scan the scene again, this time asking, "Hmmm, what more is there to see? What draws my attention and curiosity?" When we change our focus to curiosity, we are shifting our attention to the possibility that there is more going on than meets the eye.

In step 1, we let our achieving brains do what they love to do—make lists and catalog actions—but we don't want to get stuck there. Now we are using curiosity to activate our awakened brains and our ability to perceive complexity. As you scan the scene this time, you look for things that are interesting, things that might be more than they appear. Don't linger too long on any one thing—just see what little details spark your curiosity.

It might take some practice to get your curiosity going full speed. That's okay; we are building a mental muscle, and that takes repetition and effort, just like working out. After scanning the scene for a while, pick out one or two things that provoke your curiosity, provoke a sense of "Huh, I'm curious—how does that work?" or "That's so beautiful—what makes it look like that?" Once you have spent three to five minutes being curious, you are ready for the next step.

Step 3—Put on Your Wonder Glasses: Now put on your Wonder Glasses, the ones with the bright green frames and thick lenses, and pick one of the things your curiosity noticed. Land your gaze on that one thing and let it rest there a moment while asking, "There's something wonderful here—what is it?" Keep looking at it with the expectation of wonderfulness until it appears, and when it does, hold it in appreciation and amazement. You've now fully entered into the flow world, gazing into the present moment deeply, and ready to find the wonder that is right there, waiting to be noticed and appreciated. There is no action item or follow-up (no pending transaction) to do at this point. Just let the experience rise and fall on its own.

If you wish to make a journal entry about the experience later, to be able to look back on it and savor the moment and the emotional nature of the experience, that might be helpful. Studies show that reflection practices like journaling help develop our sensitivity to deeply emotional experiences.

That's it! That is all you have to do. If you got through steps 1 and 2 but didn't quite get to step 3 and Wonder, that's okay. Try it again twenty-four hours later or whenever you find yourself in a better environment, a better place. Eventually, you will be able to shift into a wonder mindset in any environment, and in any place, distracting or not.

In the Living Room with Dave

The Wonder Glasses exercise is surprisingly easy to do. Here's how Dave does it—putting on his Wonder Glasses while sitting in his living room.

Step 0—Set Up: Dave sits in his living room on the couch, facing the front windows. It's the middle of the afternoon, and the sun is streaming in. Moving around the room clockwise, he notices an oversize couch, a glass-topped coffee table, a fireplace with a marble hearth, two upholstered swivel rocking chairs in front of a picture window, an upright piano, an ancient grandfather clock, and a small, round bookshelf doubling as an end table. Dave's two dogs, Daisy and Chico, are there, too, Chico next to him on the couch and Daisy on one of the rockers.

Step 1—Putting on His Normal Glasses: As Dave scans the room from left to right, this is what he notices: *I should've lit the fireplace. Even though it's sunny, I like having a fire. Gosh, the slipcovers on those rockers are tired. Those patches on the armrests look awful and really should be replaced! The piano needs tuning, too, but… nobody ever plays it anymore, so maybe it doesn't matter. I do love how Chico puts his head on my lap; what a sweet dog.* Then Dave closes his eyes and notices all the action items that came to mind: light the fireplace, replace the chair covers, tune the piano, pet the dog. Four pending transactions—all actions to be completed in some future moment. He pats Chico on the head, then mentally puts all the other things out of his consciousness and looks around the room again.

Step 2—Putting on His Curiosity Glasses: Now Dave thinks, *Okay, now that we've gotten that out of the way, what else is going on in here? What am I curious about?* When he scans the room again, this is what he notices. *Well, of course there are patches on those rockers! An awful lot of people have sat in those chairs. That grandfather clock hasn't run in decades. I wonder when the last time was that it actually chimed, actually was relied on to tell people what time it is. Who was in the room for that last chime…?* Dave notices that he is now much more present in the room and thinking about what is actually in front of him, here and now, and that's a good thing.

Step 3—Putting on His Wonder Glasses: Now Dave holds those two curiosities—the patched chair and the long-silent clock—in his mind and lets his attention be drawn to… the chair. He gazes at that worn and patched chair expectantly, wondering what else is there and notices: *My, those chairs have heard a lot of stories. People don't just sit there; they tell their stories there—stories of joy, confusion, anger, pain, births, deaths. That chair has heard it all.*

Dave lets a cavalcade of conversations held with people in that chair roll across the movie screen of his mind: Family. Friends. The student who drove ninety minutes just to get one more office hour. The first-time start-up founder sweating blood over every decision and every dollar. The neighbor whose daughter wouldn't speak to her. *All those lives are a wonder to me. What a privilege it is to be invited into the depths of another person's story. What a lovely reminder those patches are of all the love and lives that chair has held. Maybe I'll just leave the patches as they are.*

That's it—Dave has reached a state of wonder, in the moment, and it has evoked memories he savors as he slowly returns to the reality of his living room on the couch, facing the front windows in the middle of the afternoon with the

sun streaming in.

Exercise: Museum Magic: Curating Your Curiosity

Orientation

This exercise is taken from one we have done with many different student groups from twelve-year-old junior high school students to eighty-year-old Stanford's Distinguished Careers Institute fellows. It leverages how your brain is optimized to see what you're *looking for* versus what you're *looking at* in a way that can turbocharge your curiosity. This exercise works particularly well in a museum setting, where you'll have easy access to a wide range of different things all in one place. We usually do it at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford, but any museum will work.

To get the most out of this exercise, it's important to understand what its purpose is and isn't. This exercise is a practicum, focused on process to train the designer's mindset of curiosity (which is the doorway to wonder). This is not about finding the most important feature or theme of the work. Rather, it is about finding what about each work or exhibit is interesting to you right in the moment and engaging that interest. Avoid reading gallery descriptions and posted information as you're searching. This is a visual/interactive/personal journey and NOT a critical/analytical journey. Think of it as an improv game—just be ready to say yes to what grabs you at each step of the exercise.

Materials

- You and an hour of your time (preferably two)
- A friend (or two or three)
  - It's optional to do with another person or group, but it's more fun if more than one of you do it together (each person does their own observing and sketching). That way, you can have an interactive discussion as part of the reflection at the end, which enhances the experience substantially.
- A museum of your choice
- A sketch pad and pencil (most museums permit this—but pencil only, usually)

Engagement Process

Pick your first object selection criterion from the list below (choose any one):

- Material and Medium
- Color or Lighting
- Contrast or Conflict
- Emotion

- Story or Tradition
- Familiar or New

Now wander into the first gallery you find and enter it in search of an object that speaks to or relates to the theme you have picked. For instance, if you selected the theme Emotion, and you saw a statue of someone crying, that might grab your attention. Spend no more than one to three minutes looking for "your" object. If more than one thing seems to speak to your theme—just pick one; it won't matter which one.

First Artifact Observation

When you've selected an artifact or object, do the following:

1. Stop and pay attention to it—for a total of at least three to five minutes (likely more).
2. Sketch it (or a detail of it) from at least two different views (taking two different vantage points of observation) to become more intimate with the object.
3. As you are sketching and observing, reflect on these questions:
   a. What are you noticing?
   b. What is interesting to you, and how did it attract your attention?
   c. What, if anything, are you getting out of this?
4. As soon as you've sketched, jot down your key thoughts right by your sketches on your sketch pad.
5. After that's done (not before!), answer this question: "What did you notice about the piece later during your observation that you didn't see initially?" (It can be anything—mounting, messaging, color, texture, scale…) For example, after sketching the statue of the crying person a few times, you recall noticing how the different surface textures—some rough, some smooth, some polished—caught the light differently at your two sketch positions. You pick your next theme to be *surface*.

Observation Continued (Artifacts 2–5)

- Make that final noticing from your sketching encounter your new theme lens and look for a new piece or artifact that calls out to you from that perspective. You can continue in the same gallery, or, if the museum is big enough, try another room with different things in it. For instance, in our example, in the next room while looking for something related to "surface," you notice an exhibit on the history of tattooing and are intrigued by how different cultures have thought in different ways about what their skin—their *surface*—means to them. There's an ancient tattoo hammer on display, and you choose that to observe and draw.

- Pick a new object and repeat all five steps again. In our example, after drawing the tattoo hammer, you notice pain (it really hurts to get hit with one of those things hundreds of times in a tattoo session)—and off you go

looking for something that connects to “pain.” And so it goes for all five or more objects.

- Each object you encounter in this way will likely take about ten minutes of your time to do thoroughly. You should be able to encounter five or six objects in an hour.
- Repeat as many times as you can in the time you’ve allotted (forty-five to ninety minutes is recommended—per your preference). Set a firm stop time.
- Try to observe/sketch at least five items.
- Visit at least three galleries or rooms to ensure a variety of experiences and artifact forms.
- Maintain an attitude of focused curiosity throughout. Work hard. Pay attention.

Reflection

When you’re all done, find a place where you can sit quietly and reflect on your experience—don’t wait until you get home, as the memories will no longer be fresh. Most museums have a café or some benches on the grounds or in the lobby, where you can easily do this reflection. On your sketch pad, jot down your thoughts on these questions:

- What object most engaged your curiosity—why and how?
- Did you exit the museum more curious than you entered it? What seemed to contribute to that (or not)?
- What is the role of your intention and focus, and how does that help bring out your curiosity?
- Make a list of your sequence of theme lenses. Can you connect the dots to see any common thread or meta-narrative in your tour (there may or may not be one)?
- What surprised you along the way?
- How does this compare to how you would normally visit a museum? (Most people feel like they’ve had a deeper, richer experience than usual and that the time flew by.)
- How does this compare to how you go about any other day in your regular life?
- Can you use anything you’ve learned at the museum in forming a competency in getting more out of rather than cramming more into your life?

Discuss (if you did this with others)

- Check in: Each share your favorite object and one surprise.
- How does this compare to your typical museum visit? What was fun/different about it?
- How does this compare to how you go about any other day?
- What are you learning? What questions does this raise?
- What takeaways did you get related to forming a competency in getting more out of—rather than cramming more into—your life?

Description 5

her parents proud. Her real love was the piano, and in addition to studying chemistry, which she'd done very successfully, she'd also secretly kept up her piano playing and had just been admitted for a master's in fine arts at the Juilliard School in New York.

"Oh... so you need help figuring out how to tell your parents you want to go to Juilliard instead of medical school?" asked Dave.

"No. That's not it," Steena said to Dave's surprise. "The real problem is my boyfriend. If I'm going to commit myself to being a pianist, I don't think I can love the piano and a man at the same time. I don't think I have room in my life for both of them, and I don't know how to tell my boyfriend. He loves me, but the truth is, I don't love him as much as I do the piano. I don't want to hurt him, but I know I have to let him go."

Dave figured there had to be a way out of this dilemma, but after a long discussion examining every alternative, he had to agree with Steena's conclusion. Her devotion to the piano was clear and unshakable, and she simply refused to accept a life in which she gave either her instrument or her boyfriend any less than her total devotion. She had to choose —and she chose the piano. All that remained was breaking the news to her young man. As she walked away, Dave marveled at both her conviction and her courage.

Despite their differences, these three people share one thing: They are living what we call a *coherent life*—one that genuinely reflects their values. Their actions align with who they are and what they believe—sometimes effortlessly, sometimes at great cost, but always in alignment. Coherence brings clarity, direction, and a deep sense of purpose. These people know who they are and where they need to be.

We define coherence as the ability to live with these three key elements aligned and interconnected:

- Who you are
- What you do
- What you believe

When these three elements harmonize, life flows naturally and meaningfully—you don't just exist, you thrive.

Put simply, a coherent life is what happens when your actions are an honest expression of who you are right now and what truly matters to you. With that alignment, you feel purposeful and confident about where you're headed, and each day carries more meaning.

We call these three interconnected dots your *compass*. When we can connect the dots clearly, our compass is calibrated and we're on course. When we can't connect the dots, or don't even know where they are, we feel disoriented and lost.

One thing to keep in mind: You can strive for perfect coherency, but you will probably never get to 100 percent. There are constraints in the real world that we all have to deal with, the external forces of mortgages, families, imperfect jobs, and so on. Living coherently doesn't mean that your problems disappear and everything is in perfect harmony all the time. At some points in life, maintaining a solid sense of coherency is quite a challenge. During big trials, Reg sometimes went so long without writing a poem

that he worried he'd never write another one. At other times, it feels like life is going okay and coherence comes naturally. Derek never ran into any serious conflict at work because he never took a job that demanded more than he wanted to give it. And all his kids loved doing the same outdoorsy stuff he did, so it worked for Derek. But in some rare cases, there just isn't an available compromise, and some hard choices need to be made. Steena accepted the huge compromise of giving up her boyfriend because of her uncompromising commitment to the piano. By the way, Steena told Dave that had she not been admitted by Juilliard, she was ready to accept that their rejection meant she was not a good enough pianist to dedicate her life to music and she would have gone to medical school and very likely have married her boyfriend. Circumstances matter, and there isn't just one right answer for any of us. How you navigate these challenges to make your way to coherence may comprise some of the most important decisions you ever make.

No matter the circumstances, the design challenge is universal: Begin with radical acceptance—embrace your life as it is, acknowledge what cannot be changed, and keep returning to the values and pursuits that give it meaning and purpose. What's encouraging is that for almost everyone we've spoken to, living coherently was always within reach. Reg, Derek, and Steena (who are all real people we have worked with, though their names and stories have been anonymized) found their way to living coherently. For the people we've met who failed to attain coherency, the real challenge wasn't an impossible circumstance; it was usually a reluctance to embrace necessary changes or to engage in the deep reflection needed to find some clarity. Reg could have chosen to just languish bitterly about having to make a living as a lawyer, but he found a workable solution by creatively practicing the mindset of radical acceptance.

We know this isn't always easy, but we also know you are capable of creating a life that aligns with your values and brings greater meaning to each day. By taking small, intentional steps, you can cultivate more coherence, more purpose, and more fulfillment —starting right now.

So, let's get to work. There are four tasks required to design and live a more coherent life:

- Build your compass and calibrate it
- Make coherency sightings (i.e., take compass readings)
- Reflect on those sightings
- Recalibrate your compass

Compass Building

Living the coherent life is done by recognizing moments of coherency, then capturing and reflecting on those experiences to make the most of them. That only works when you have articulated what coherency is for you so that you'll recognize it when it's happening. That's where building your compass comes in. The compass comprises defining and connecting the three dots of who you are, what you believe, and what you do. We'll build

your compass with these three writings:

- My Current Story (who you are)
- My Workview (what you do)
- My Lifeview (what you believe)

My Current Story

My Current Story is just that—a short description of what's currently going on for you, what life is all about at this time. It's not your whole story or your autobiography, nor is it just what you're currently reading or had for lunch. It's a snapshot (typically fifty to two hundred words) of the important things that describe who you are and what's going on *right now*. It will reflect both your current circumstances and what's most important to you in them.

We have a close friend, Lena, an accomplished creative in her fifties who just went through a divorce, the sale of her home, and moving her youngest son off to college. She was also recently diagnosed with Lyme disease, so it's been eighteen months of radical change. Here's Lena's current story:

> I'm in a season of unraveling—and reinvention. After years of relentless achievement, I've hit pause—not because I wanted to but because my body asked me to. The Lyme diagnosis has forced me to slow down. Slowing down has never been my thing, and it's uncomfortable. I'm not taking on as many projects anymore, and saying no to people is also uncomfortable. And weird. I've had to close myself off to so many things, but at the same time I feel like I've never been more open—to my own healing, to different kinds of creativity, even to the possibility of falling in love again. I live near the beach now, a place I've wanted to live since I was twenty-one years old. The slow rhythm is teaching me something my professional sphere never could—how to move at the speed of trust. I still work, just differently. I make fewer time commitments, and that's left room for more clarity. Less proving and more presence. My kids are growing up. My work is evolving. I'm lifting weights, doing hot yoga, and learning what it means to live in a body I want to care for instead of one I want to punish and push. My current story is about alignment. Letting go of roles that no longer fit. Listening more than I speak. And asking not "What can I build next?" but "What wants to be born through me now?" It sounds a little woo-woo, I know, but I don't have all the answers. Some days, honestly, I'm not even sure I know who I am anymore. It's terrifying, but also kind of exciting.

So, what's your current story?

Yours will sound different, but you get the idea. What's your current story? Let your mind run down the list of things that are going on: your work life, your love life, your family, your recreation, your reading and learning, your challenges, your transitions, your adventures, the people, the ideas, your health, your hopes and worries, your goals and dreams. Let your mind scan through the whole list of things that comprise your life and

jot down a short list of what the important things are now. Then just tell your story. Don't overthink it. Keep it handy; we'll put it to use shortly.

My Workview and Lifeview

My Current Story tells who you are and locates where you're standing in your life at this time. The next question is: In what direction are you going? To answer that question, you need two things: a Workview—to help you make sense of the role work plays in your life, since for most people it's their single biggest activity—and a Lifeview—to guide your broader sense of purpose and keep you aligned over the long arc of your life. The job of the Workview is to define what work means to you. What is work for? Why do you do it? What makes good work good? By discovering and being able to articulate your philosophy of work (what it's for and why you do it), you will be better able to extract meaning from your experiences at work and find a sense of purpose in it. Lifeview is a little different. It may sound a bit lofty, but it's really not. Everyone has a Lifeview, but you may not have articulated it before. A Lifeview is simply your ideas about the world and how it works. What gives life meaning? What makes your life worthwhile or valuable? How does your life relate to others in your family, your community, and the world? What does money, recognition, or personal accomplishment have to do with a satisfying life? How important are experience, growth, and fulfillment in your life?

Don't worry, we know that your Workview and Lifeview will change. It's obvious that the Workview and Lifeview you have as a teenager, as a young college grad, or as an empty nester will all be substantially different. The point is, you don't have to have it all figured out for the rest of your life; you just have to create the compass for what life's about right now. The most important thing about your Workview and Lifeview is that they are *yours*.

Parker Palmer, a renowned educational reformer and author of *Let Your Life Speak*, writes that at one point he had to confess to himself that he was simply doing a noble job of living someone else's life. Parker was emulating his heroes—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Dorothy Day—the great social justice icons of the 1950s and '60s. Out of admiration for their leadership and sacrifice, he set his path in the world by their compass, not his own, and aspired to bring reform to higher education as an exemplary leader. He earned a PhD in education at UC Berkeley and was on track to reach his goal of becoming a respected university president. That was all fine and good, but Parker hated it. He came to the realization that he could be inspired by others, but that didn't mean he had to walk their same path. He abandoned trying to be what he wasn't—an institutional chief executive—and redesigned his life as a thought leader and writer. He was still working for the same goals but in a way that was less imitative and more authentic.

There are lots of powerful voices in the world and lots of powerful voices in our heads, all telling us what to do or who to be. And because there are many models for how life is supposed to be lived—we all run the risk, like Parker, of accidentally using someone else's compass and living someone else's life. The best way to avoid this is to clearly articulate your own Workview and Lifeview to build your own unique and trustworthy compass.

And remember, for most of us, some trade-offs and compromises have to be made along the way, including some you might not like. If your Lifeview is that art is the only

thing worth pursuing, and your Workview tells you that it's critical to make enough money so your kids have what they need for a good start in life, you may need to make a compromise in your Lifeview while your children are dependent and at home. But that will be okay, because that's your conscious choice of an acceptable trade-off. Living coherently doesn't mean everything is in perfect order all the time. It simply means you are living in alignment with your values and have not sacrificed your integrity along the way. When you have a good compass guiding you, you have the power to cut these kinds of deals with yourself. If you can see the connections between who you are, what you believe, and what you are doing, you will know when you are on course, when there is tolerable tension, when there might need to be some careful compromises, and when you are in need of a major course correction.

You may be thinking, *Hey, guys, just* how *do we* know *when the tension between our real life and our values is fine (like Derek), tolerable (like Reg), in need of some adjustment, or requires a major correction (like Steena)?* Discerning what is an acceptable compromise or when one is needed is difficult and intensely personal. It's also unpredictable because discernment isn't about simply applying rules of thumb. It arises within you as an awareness that's reached maturity at a particular moment of your life. You can't see it until you're ready to see it, so you have to be patient and have a little faith in yourself. We won't attempt a whole treatise on discernment here, but we can say this: If you pay attention. If you do the work of defining your Compass Values (which we'll explain shortly). If you notice your experience of your life (we'll show you how). If you adopt the designer's mindset of *create your world* and keep fine-tuning and better articulating your story. If you take coherency sightings as outlined later this chapter. If you do these sorts of things... then when the time has come for you to make a change, it will be evident to you. Now, we know how aggravating it is when someone says something like, "Oh... when the time is right for a change, you'll know. You'll just know." We hate being patronized like that and expect you do, too. That's not what we're saying. What we're saying is that by actively adopting these mindsets and doing the sometimes hard, sometimes delightful work of paying attention to such things, you will empower your capacity for discernment and increasingly be able to hear your own best wisdom at the right time.

So now it's time for you to write your Workview and Lifeview to build out your compass.

Workview Reflection

Write a short reflection about your Workview. We're not looking for a term paper here, but we do want you to really write this down. Don't just do it in your head. Once you've thought through your ideas, the writing should take about thirty to sixty minutes. Target length is 250 to 350 words—less than a page of typed writing.

A Workview should address the critical issues related to what work is and what it means to you. It is not just a list of what you want from or out of work but a general statement of your view of work. It's your definition for what good work deserves to be. A Workview may address such questions as:

- Why work?
- What's work for?
- What does work mean?
- How does it relate to the individual, others, society?
- What defines good or worthwhile work?
- What does money have to do with it?
- What do experience, growth, and fulfillment have to do with it?

Here's Lena's Workview:

> For years, my work was about survival—hustling to prove I was useful and worthy to the world and to myself. Work used to be exhausting, but now that I'm in a pause, it's revealed something vital: my work is not my identity, but it is an extension of my love. Work has become sacred—not in the sense of martyrdom or sacrifice but as a living, breathing expression of purpose. Work is how I pray with my hands. It's where meaning takes form and gets messy, complicated, and real. It's not just what I do to earn a living—it's how I stay alive in the truest sense. Work, when it's good, is a place where I can tell the truth—about shame, about joy, about the thousand lives we live in one body. Whether I'm writing, mentoring, speaking, or simply showing up with presence, my work must align with my soul. If it doesn't nourish me, stretch me, or serve something beyond my ego, it's not mine to do. I believe good work is connective. It says: I see you. I've been there, too. It invites others into dignity. It ripples beyond one life. Money matters—it buys stability, safety, time—but for me, money is not the measure of good work. Integrity is. Impact is. Joy is. At this stage, my work is about making beauty out of brokenness, creating spaces—on the page, in community, in conversation—where people can tell the truth and still be loved. Work is where I transmute pain into power and where hope can become contagious. That's what I'm here for.

In the years we've been helping people with this exercise, we've noticed that a Workview is a pretty new idea for most people. And we've noticed that when people get stuck on this exercise, it is because they just write what they're looking for in a job or an employment situation, which is a job description. For this exercise, we're not interested in *what* work you want to do but *why* you work.

What we're after is your philosophy of work—what it's for, what it means. It's essentially your work manifesto. When using the term *work*, we mean the broadest definition—not just what you do to make money or for "a job." Work is often the largest single component of most people's waking lives, and over a lifetime, it occupies more of our attention and energy than anything else we do. Accordingly, we're suggesting you take the time to reflect and articulate what work and vocation mean to you (and perhaps what you hope it means for others as well).

Workviews can and do range widely in what they address and how they incorporate different issues, such as service to others and the world, money and standard of living, and

growth, learning, skills, and talents. All of these can be part of the equation. We want you to address what you think is important. You do not have to address the question of service to others or any explicit connection to social issues. However, the positive psychologist Martin Seligman found that the people who can make an explicit connection between their work and something socially meaningful to them are more likely to find satisfaction and are more able to adapt to the inevitable stresses and compromises that come with working in the world. Since most people tell us they long for satisfying and meaningful work, we encourage you to explore the questions above and write down your Workview. Your compass won't be complete without it.

Lifeview Reflection

Just as you did with the Workview, write a reflection on your Lifeview. While you may spend some time thinking about it, the writing should also take no more than thirty to sixty minutes and should be 250 to 350 words or so. Below are some questions that are often addressed in a Lifeview, just to get you started. The key thing is to address those critical defining values and perspectives that provide the basis for your understanding of life. Your Lifeview is what provides your definition of what have been called "matters of ultimate concern." It's what matters most to you.

- Why are we here?
- What is the meaning/purpose of life?
- What is the relationship between the individual and others?
- Where do family, country, and the rest of the world fit in?
- What is good? What is evil?
- Is there a higher power, God, or something transcendent, and if so, how does this impact your life?
- What is the role of joy, sorrow, justice, injustice, love, peace, strife in life?

We realize that these are somewhat philosophical questions, and we did just mention the G-word. Some readers will see God as unimportant; others may have wanted us to address this up front as the most important issue. You've probably figured out by now that design is values-neutral, and we don't take sides. The questions, including the ones about God or spirituality, are given to provoke your thinking, and it's up to you to see which ones you want to try to answer. They are not talking points for religious or political debates, and there are no wrong answers. No wrong Lifeviews. The only way to do this incorrectly is not to do it at all. Besides that, be curious and think like a designer. Add the questions that work for you, make up your own, and see what you discover.

Here are Lena's answers to the Lifeview questions:

> I believe we are here to love—each other, ourselves, this wildly imperfect world. I used to think life was about becoming someone better. Striving to learn more so we can be more. Now I know it's about remembering who we really are beneath the performance, the survival instincts we mistake for personality, the shame. We are stardust with a heartbeat. The purpose of life, for me, is to grow more whole—by

telling the truth, by forgiving what I thought was unforgivable, by holding the tension between hope and heartbreak. My life has had joy and also lots of sorrow, like everyone's has. Death. Divorce. Failure. Starting over again and again. I used to think those things were the end of the world; now I just think of them as necessary parts to the whole. I believe in a higher power—not one with a beard and a gavel for judging but a Love so big it makes room for all of it. Grace is my religion. Not the shiny, Sunday-best kind but the gritty grace that meets us in a jail cell, a hospital bed, a messy kitchen, or a whispered prayer for help. God used to be a distant concept. Not anymore. Now I think God is in everyone and everything all at once. And we're all connected. My healing ripples outward. So does my harm. I try to choose healing. I think this choice changes everything, from how I spend my time to how I speak to my friends to how I show up with my family. I guess it's all about being present, letting go of things that don't matter in the big picture, and trusting that everything is going to work out. What is something good now? Anything rooted in compassion. What is bad? Anything that feels like fear or disconnection. I want my life now to be in service to something bigger than me. I used to want more recognition and validation and accomplishment; now I want more justice, truth, connection, and health, of course.

Now it's time to write down your answers.
Ready? Begin.

Calibrating Your Compass—Identifying Your Compass Values

Like any instrument your compass needs to be calibrated, fine-tuned for accuracy. The first step of calibration is doing an integration check. Read over your Lifeview and Workview and write down a few thoughts on each of the following questions:

- Where do your Workview and Lifeview complement each other?
- Where do they clash?
- What elements in one do and don't have correlation in the other?
- Does one drive the other? How?

Please take some time to write up your thoughts on the integration of your two views. Our readers tell us that this is where they often get the biggest aha moments, so give the integration some thought. In most cases, this reflection will result in some editing of one or both of your views.

Having completed your integration check, it's time for a relevancy check. Go back and reread your My Current Story, then review your updated Workview and Lifeview, this time asking:

- Do these versions of my Workview and Lifeview adequately reflect my current situation?
- Is there something in My Current Story that's missing here and warrants attention in

my Workview or Lifeview?

Make any final edits that these questions bring to your attention. Now your My Current Story plus your Workview and Lifeview comprise an authentic, integrated, and personally relevant compass.

To make your compass design readily usable in day-to-day life, we'll take one last calibration step to identify your Compass Values. A traditional compass points in the direction of magnetic north, from which you can calculate true north, the cardinal direction that orients the compass. Your core values define what direction points "north" on your life compass. Studying all three of your My Current Story, Workview, and Lifeview will reveal many different values—some explicitly stated, some implied in context or between the lines. But at any given moment in life, some values are more important, more relevant than others. What we're looking for are the top three to five values that most matter to you at this time. These are your Compass Values. Of course, all your values matter, but you don't want to be overwhelmed. Coherency isn't about perfection; it's about being in alignment with what's most important. Prioritizing a short list of your Compass Values will make coherency clearer and therefore more attainable. Expect your values short list to change over time, which is fine and just means that you're continuing to evolve as a person. But at any point, you want to have a clear view and a firm grip on which way is north. So keep your definition of north simple and concise. Your list of Compass Values can't include everything at once.

Let's try an example to illustrate how to extract Compass Values from the three key compass components: My Current Story, Workview, and Lifeview.

We'll use Lena as our example.

We want to be clear—this isn't about presenting an ideal or prescribing the "right" way to live. Values are deeply personal. And while Lena's values reflect her life at this particular moment, yours will reflect your own priorities and circumstances and background. Our only goal is to illustrate the process of identifying Compass Values using a real and integrated story.

Compass Values Extraction Example for Lena

Let's look at each of Lena's three compass components to distill the values that define her true north:

Lena's My Current Story: Lena is in a season of unraveling. After years of achieving, hustling, and proving, Lyme disease has called her inward. She's let go of building her company and external success markers and is now devoted to healing, slowing down, writing, exercising, and exploring the possibility of a new love. She lives in a place that gives her peace, she listens deeply, and she chooses what aligns. Her work is no longer about striving—it's about integrity, joy, and love.

Lena's Workview: Work is a sacred expression, not a hustle. It's how she channels love, hope, truth, and transformation into the world. Good work connects, stretches, and serves. It's honest. Money matters only to the extent that it provides stability and space to do that meaningful work. If the work doesn't serve her soul or others, she's no longer

willing to force it.

Lena's Lifeview: Life is about becoming whole—telling the truth and still being loved. She believes in grace as a spiritual force, in forgiveness, in the interconnectedness of all things. Joy and sorrow coexist. Justice is only true if rooted in compassion. Connection, love, beauty, and repair are central.

Reading over her writing, we are able to look at each of Lena's three elements to find the Compass Value set that will succinctly define her true north.

Lena's My Current Story is clearly focused on moving at a new pace—going inward, slowing down, and paying attention to her health and well-being. The word *healing* is evident in all she's doing, and so that deserves to be on the list. Both Lena's Current Story and her Workview mention the word *sacred*, whether it's implicit in how she's approaching the "unraveling" of an identity built around striving or the very clearly stated idea that to her work is "sacred." Because the word features up front in both reflections, *sacredness* seems an important value to add to the list. Another word that figures prominently in Lena's Lifeview and Workview is *truth*, so that is a clear value important to Lena's Current Story, whether it's the truth of needing to slow down and focus on her physical health or the prioritizing of work that's rooted in what is true and meaningful for her now. *Connection* is another value we can extract from her Workview and Lifeview, and one that helps her consider where to spend her limited time as she's healing. And, finally, we have the value of *grace*, which is both explicit and implicit in the three components of her compass. Grace for herself, in admitting her new limits with her work, and as a spiritual value she applies to those around her.

Of course, there are other values that could be extracted from Lena's reflections, but given her Current Story, Lifeview, and Workview, she agrees that the five values listed below are what she's prioritizing now.

From her reflections, we can compose a succinct list of Lena's **Compass Values** at this point in her life:

- **Healing**
- **Grace**
- **Truth**
- **Connection**
- **Sacredness**

That list fits easily on a Post-it note with room to spare. At any moment and in any situation, Lena can get her coherency bearings by reviewing these Compass Values to determine if she's on the right compass course or needs to make an adjustment.

When your Workview and Lifeview sync with your Current Story, you steer life with deliberate clarity. Think of a seasoned sailor: winds shift, storms roll in, and sometimes you hug the shoreline, but a reliable compass always points true north. Likewise, each course correction—whether a bold tack or a temporary pause—remains intentional, keeping you aimed at a coherent, meaningful life no matter what conditions arise.

Recalibrating Your Compass

Anytime you're changing your situation, or pursuing a new thing, or wondering what you're doing at a particular job—stop. Before continuing, it's a good idea to check your compass and recalibrate it if necessary. Then you can take an accurate reading on where you are and how you're doing. Recalibrating your compass involves nothing more than reviewing each of the three elements—My Current Story, Workview, and Lifeview—and revising them to reflect the latest changes in you, your thinking, and your circumstances. While there's no right rhythm, it makes sense to review these things at least annually and certainly following any big shifts or moves. For Lena, that shift was illness. A year from now, it might be full health, or a new creative project, or another move. When that time comes, her Compass Values may shift as well—perhaps **Curiosity** or **Creativity** rise, and **Healing** becomes embedded and integrated. Compass recalibration is a good habit to sustain your practice for living a meaningful life.

Rotate your tires.

Change the battery in your smoke detector.

Double-check your Workview and Lifeview and make sure they align with one another and your updated My Current Story.

Coherency Sightings

The positive psychology movement says that the number one exercise in improving the quality of your life is to make a gratitude list. This is a simple exercise where, at the end of each day, you spend a few minutes writing down three things you were grateful for on that particular day. This is a great first step in directing your attention to where and when you are experiencing things that matter to you. There's gold in this, but the gratitude exercise often only takes us into the transactional world.

Think about it. *Today, I was grateful that I got a free hamburger. I was grateful to make that green light when I was running late. I was grateful to get the kiss I was hoping my partner would give me when I got home.* These are all really transactions (yes—even the kiss, if you just focus on getting it instead of basking in the affection flowing in it). They're events. They are outcomes. And that's what we see most people write down when doing the gratitude exercise.

We're going to take it up a level and look for coherency sightings, which have greater potential for evoking meaning. Instead of just noticing what we're grateful for, we are going to pay attention to when we are having a lived experience of connecting the dots of who I am, what I believe in, and what I'm doing that reflect my Compass Values. Coherency sightings sound a little different from gratitude sightings. *Today, I had a chance to exercise generosity when I picked up the tab for the guy behind me in line at the burger joint.* Or: *I was glad to show affection today by bringing my partner some unexpected flowers after work.*

You can find the detailed instructions for coherency sightings in the Try Stuff section at the end of this chapter. Coherency sightings are a simple but powerful tool. We

strongly recommend that you do them and do them regularly.

Coherency on the Job

The number one place where people report that they experience meaning in their lives is at work. That may be a surprise to some (perhaps you thought it would be at home, among family, or out in nature), but if you think about it for a moment, it makes a lot of sense.

Work is the activity, place, and community where the overwhelming majority of us expend our greatest energies and time (two thousand to three thousand hours a year for most of us—nothing else comes close). It typically is the place of our largest impact and our most substantial output. "Hey—aren't we mostly in the transactional world at work?" you ask. "How does work top the list of meaning-making?"

Great questions. The workplace is indeed almost entirely transactional, so where's the meaning, and how do we extract it? The trick to doing this is twofold. First, we need to focus on different things, and then we need to look at those things differently.

Most people focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the impact of their work, their outcomes—things like "Did our menu overhaul at our restaurant achieve our goal of at least 50 percent gluten-free choices?" or "Did the children who used our home reading app do better in school than those that didn't?" These things are important and are the types of outcome-oriented measures that organizations are after and track religiously. And hitting those goals and those KPIs (key performance indicators) does matter. Even though most of this book is about helping you expand your meaning-making beyond impact to include wonder, flow, coherence, and formative community, we still think impact is great stuff and hope you succeed in making an impact. But making an impact isn't predictable, and even when it works, the big outcomes occur too seldom to provide the kind of steady meaning diet that we're all hungry for. So, let's complement impact by adding some coherency to our meaning-making diet at work.

There's a treasure trove of coherency sightings awaiting us all at work. All we have to do is shift our attention from just looking at the *what* (the outcome) we are working toward to the *how* of the actual interactions and activity we and our coworkers are engaged in every day. Once we've turned our attention to the how of our immediate work experience (which has cleverly moved us from the transactional world into the flow world pulsing all around us at work), we can start looking for moments where coherency is happening. For example, if you have a Compass Value of putting others first, you would log a coherency moment when you let a junior member of your team make the progress report to the staff meeting. By affirming the coherency of *how* you're doing your work, you don't have to wait for the impact of the completed project to make a meaningful moment.

Work can become suddenly much more meaningful when we start recognizing when it's coherent for us and reflect on that experience to more fully appreciate it. We acknowledge there are many places beyond work where you can experience coherency, but we recommend doing lots of coherency sighting at work, as it's by far the biggest opportunity for most people, *and it's one that's largely untapped for most of us*. Finding

more meaning on the job is a huge get-more-out-of-life instead of try-to-cram-more-into-life opportunity.

Coherency Benefits

Doing coherency sightings as a practice, not just a one-time thing, brings lasting benefits. First, we predict that you'll notice moments of coherency more readily. By having coherency in the back of your mind, you're more likely to catch the moments when they occur. Second, we predict that you'll find that you are starting to live a more coherent life and will do so seemingly effortlessly. Your coherency won't be increasing because you're trying harder or are more dedicated but simply because your raised level of awareness will naturally keep you on the right compass heading. Skiers and mountain bikers know well that you go where you look. So, if you want to ski the right track or bike the right line—look there and you'll go there. Look at the tree or the rut—you'll go there, too. Attention matters. When you're looking for coherency, you go there. It's one more way to adopt the designer's mindset of availability. When you adhere to such a practice, you are training your attention, which makes you more available to both having and noticing moments of coherency. And that's exactly the kind of meaningful moment-making we're after.

Attending to your coherency also helps you gain more access to the flow world. In the transactional world, life is all about production—achieving that future goal or desired outcome. In the flow world, life is all about participation—being fully present to and deeply engaged in the moment you and those around you are living. Coherency is about how you are participating in life, not just what you've produced. Coherency is available at any time; you don't have to wait for final results before celebrating it. Coherency sightings allow us to access the flow world while still actively participating in the very busy transactional world.

Coherency sightings are one of our favorite design tools for getting more out of life. Why is that? Why focus on these sightings, and why are they so important? Because moments of coherency are moments when you are living out your best intentions. They are moments when you are becoming the person you long to be—a person who is manifesting their Compass Values. In a moment of coherency, you are realizing—in one small, scandalously particular way—your better self. And no act of coherency is too small to be worthy of notice! Coherency is one of those "ultimates" like beauty, justice, peace, love, and compassion—ideals we aspire to but never fully attain. It's only experienced in little chunks of real-life particularity. If kindness is one of your Compass Values, then simply giving your seat on the subway to the parent with a kid in one arm and groceries in the other counts. Catching yourself in the act of being coherent and celebrating those coherent moments when you are doing the right thing is incredibly affirming and life-giving.

But what about incoherency? Shouldn't we also be paying attention to when we're failing at this? We don't think so. In our experience, positive reinforcement is a far more powerful catalyst for growth than negative critique. Life is hard, and we all make mistakes and fall short. We're all inconsistent. It's easy to get discouraged and lose heart, or even become cynical. But discouragement and cynicism won't move you forward, won't bring

you more meaning, and won't help you bring joy to others. Most of us are oversupplied in criticism from perhaps well-meaning people who seem dedicated to making sure we know what we're doing wrong (not to mention the flood of critique coming from within our own heads). While we do recommend using your compass to make course corrections when needed, our primary suggestion is to use your compass as an affirmation tool to catch moments of coherency and celebrate them.

So, zero in on the moments when your head, heart, and hands lock into alignment—those sparks of coherence are your true north. Log each one, amplify it, and let the evidence of "getting it right" tug you forward faster than any self-critique ever could. Build your compass, chart those wins, and let the journey be joyful. We are cheering you on!

TRY STUFF

The two key activities recommended in this chapter are Build Your Compass and Coherency Sightings Log, which are both described at length above in the body of the chapter. Here's a quick reminder checklist for each:

Exercise: Build Your Compass

1. Write your My Current Story (50 to 200 words)
2. Write your Workview Reflection and Lifeview Reflection (250 to 350 words each)
3. Calibrate your compass:
   a. Review your My Current Story and check your Workview and Lifeview for relevancy.
   b. Do an integration check of your Workview and Lifeview.
   c. Extract your Compass Values from your My Current Story, Workview, and Lifeview.

Exercise: Coherency Sightings Log

Here's how to do the practice of capturing coherency sightings.

Step 1—Compass Values: Review your Lifeview and Workview exercises and your My Current Story and confirm your Compass Values per the Compass Calibration process described above—adjust if needed.

My Compass Values (with examples from Lena):

- _____ (e.g., healing)
- _____ (e.g., grace)
- _____ (e.g., truth)
- _____ (e.g., connection)
- _____ (e.g., sacredness)

- _____

Step 2—Log Coherency Sightings: Capture coherent moments in this log:

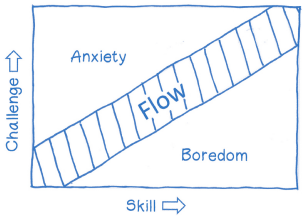
[illegible]			

Regularly (either daily or weekly), notice the instances when you are experiencing coherency because you are acting in alignment with your Compass Values. Keep a log of the date, what you were doing, and what it meant to you.

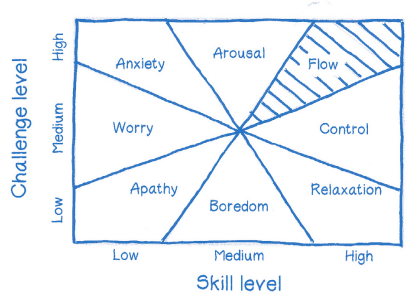
Step 3—Review and Reflect: Periodically (weekly if you are doing this daily, monthly if you are doing it weekly), review your log and journal on what you're noticing:

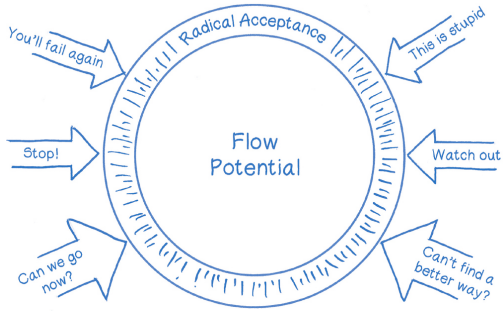
- What if any patterns are you noticing?
- What Compass Values are you seeing more often? Less often?
- What do you experience when you look back at your inventory of coherent moments?
- How is doing this practice affecting you?

Timing and Variations: We recommend most people do this practice on a weekly basis over time to build a solid record of their coherency moments. However, you could do it daily if you find it especially beneficial, or when you are just getting started to get the hang of it and quickly build up a positive coherency inventory. You could also do it less often—perhaps quarterly—as a way of taking stock of your life and checking in with yourself. You can vary the practice format as well. Try taking sightings on just one of your Compass Values (e.g., resilience) for a week and see what you find. Rotate through all the values and then reflect on what you discover.



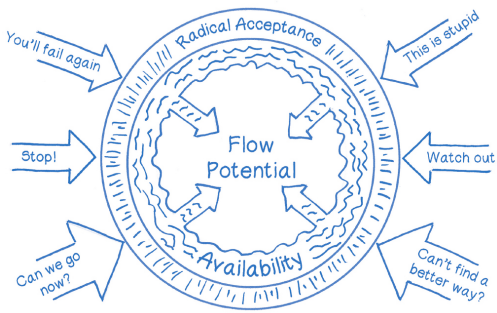
Description 6



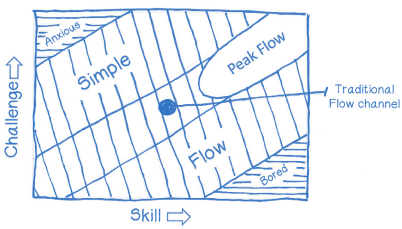


Description 7

Description 8



Description 9



Description 10

Earlier in the book, we talked about the flow world and distinguished it from a state of flow—that state when you're so deeply immersed in an activity that time dissolves, distractions fade, and every action feels effortless—like a pianist lost in the music, an athlete moving with perfect rhythm, or a writer whose words pour onto the page as if guided by an unseen force. Flow is a state of peak performance and pure engagement where challenge meets skill in perfect harmony. First introduced by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the concept of flow reveals how humans unlock their greatest potential when fully present in the moment. But what exactly triggers this elusive state of being "in the zone," and how can we cultivate more of it in our daily lives? And if it's true that we live in both the transactional world and the flow world, can we balance the two to bring more moments of meaning and purpose into our experience?

Our response to that question is an emphatic "Yes!"

Being in flow is terrific! Everyone wants more flow—in business, in sports, in our personal lives. As we pointed out in chapter 3, the reason the flow state is meaningful is because the purity of aliveness we experience in it makes us feel more human. It releases in us what Joseph Campbell called *the rapture of being alive*. Who doesn't want more of that?! The only problem with flow—at least as it's conventionally understood—is that it's a rare experience. It's too elusive to be something one can count on. In this chapter, we'll reframe a few things and chart the way to a much more accessible range of flow experiences. To do so, let's take another look at the conventional concept of the flow state, identify its limitations, and design our way onto a bigger playing field.

In the Zone

Let's begin by looking at how neuroscience understands the way flow works, and what brings on the experience of being in the zone. The reason athletics and focused, repetitive actions lend themselves to flow is that these skill-based flow moments quiet the brain, allowing muscle memory and instinct to take over. Neuroscience research makes a distinction between *implicit* functions that don't involve conscious thought and *explicit* functions that do. Explicit, conscious brain activity is what's happening in your achieving brain in the transactional world—pretty much all the time. In fact, most of us think that having thoughts—the self-aware mental activity of generating words to explicitly describe something—is all there is to thinking. But the kind of thinking done by your implicit cognition capacity isn't language-based—it's behavioral. Research has shown that the implicit system utilizes and conveys intelligence without words via the lived experience of using one's skills.

It turns out that you don't need words to think, and flow is a particular—and rather delightful—form of a largely wordless experience. Science has confirmed what design has long known—that there are lots of ways of thinking other than verbal. The Design Program at Stanford has been teaching visual thinking for decades, so this isn't news to us. And we regularly explain design thinking as a mechanism where we build to think—not where we talk or conceptualize to think.

Seeing and doing are forms of thinking—components of the implicit types of thinking

that are not verbal but experiential. Current understanding recognizes that the explicit (verbal and rule-based) and implicit (practice-based and behavioral) thinking systems can and do operate coincidentally, especially when you are learning something new.

The science tells us that flow occurs when we're operating more in our embodied, experiential modes of thinking rather than in our wordy, narrative type of thinking. One of the reasons for this is that embodied experience is almost always felt in the present moment, which is consistent with how things work in the flow world.

This has also been demonstrated by brain scans. When we calm the decision-making part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, we see increased activity in the parts of the brain involved in synthesis and finding context. We also know that other research indicates that when we quiet the prefrontal cortex and especially the fight, flight, or freeze response, centered in the amygdala, we see increased activity in parts of the brain that we now associate with the experience of awe, wonder, and transcendence. (Which we think may be a hint at why being in flow is so meaningful and delightful.)

Now that we've got a basic understanding of what flow is neurologically, let's look at where it comes from and how to access it.

The Conventional Flow Model Problem

The diagram below shows the flow channel as presented in Csikszentmihalyi's original 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

In this model, the flow state is achievable when skill and challenge are in balance during an activity. If your skill isn't up to the task, you get nervous about failing or don't know how to proceed, and anxiety takes over. If you're over-skilled for the task, it doesn't need your full attention and you get bored. When skill and challenge are in balance, the activity pulls you fully into it but doesn't overstress you. When performing an activity within this narrow flow channel, the conditions are such that the flow state of deep engagement *may* occur (or it may not).

Being in flow, as conventionally understood, is all about attaining an extremely high level of engagement in the activity you're performing—an engagement level that has the potential to become completely absorbing. This high-level engagement happens across multiple modalities simultaneously: mental, emotional, physical, and—if others are involved as in a team sport—social. The degree of engagement is high precisely because the level of challenge demands *all the skill you can muster* in the moment. The challenge pulls all your faculties together to focus on this one thing that you're doing. And it's happening in real time in the present moment. Flow is not just an intellectual or emotional experience; it's a fully human experience. So, in this type of intense flow, which we call *peak flow*, you are having a pure experience of being alive. All of you is involved (or at least lots of you is involved, and any parts of you that aren't involved are temporarily forgotten so that none of your attention is wasted), and you are entirely in the present moment where the activity is taking place.

In this type of flow state, you are experiencing what Maslow meant by *self-actualization* (i.e., being all that you can be).

"Wait a minute!" you retort. "Back in chapter 2, you guys said that Maslow's ideal of self-actualization was wrong and that we shouldn't pursue that unattainable, dead-end myth of 'fulfillment.' What's going on here?!"

"Good point!" we respond. "Glad you asked."

What's really going on here is that flow is the place where self-actualization and the scandal of particularity meet. Whoa—that's a big idea—so let's unpack it.

Maslow's original concept of self-actualization leading to fulfillment by *one becoming all that one can be* is indeed wrong—dangerously wrong, in our opinion. It's wrong because all of us contain more aliveness than can be fully expressed in one lifetime, so no matter how full a life you live, some of what you can be—your ultimate human potential—won't and can't be realized. Ever.

This is where the scandal of particularity really shines, because you can fully express yourself *in a particular moment*, which is what's happening in an experience of intense flow. Bill is an artist and experiences peak flow in his studio regularly. He describes it like this:

> When I'm standing in front of one of my large empty canvases [Bill likes to paint big] and I'm trying to figure out how to start, what this painting is about [Bill mostly paints abstract landscapes and environments], I first have to fight off all the critical voices and noise in my head. Then, once things quiet down, my curiosity picks up, and I start. When it is going really well, the painting just happens. The brush feels right in my hand, the paint has just the right squishiness, the images and colors seem to "arrive" on the canvas in perfect order [i.e., Bill shifts from *explicit* thinking in words and concepts to *implicit* thinking in practice and experience]. I just stand there, helping the painting come into focus. It is done when it needs to be done, and I step back, amazed at the mysterious nature of what just happened. If that isn't an altered state, a state of total flow, I don't know what is.

Even peak flow experiences like Bill's are *particular*—meaning they involve just a small portion of the whole person. While Bill is in flow painting, his guitar skills and his ability to teach aren't being expressed—but that's not a problem, *because he doesn't know that!* All of his attention and every bit of the focus and ability he needs are wrapped up in the act of painting. In that moment, the only parts of Bill that are being used—and the only parts he's even aware of—are the particular ones the painting calls for.

In peak flow, you feel momentarily self-actualized and fully alive because you are participating in that scandalously particular flow moment. The problem is that there's just not enough of this sort of flow available. According to Csikszentmihalyi's original theory, the opportunity for flow is limited to the (rather narrow) flow channel shown in the last figure. But wait... there's less! It actually gets worse.

In his 1997 book, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Everyday Life*, Csikszentmihalyi describes additional mental and emotional challenges to being in flow. In his updated model, the zone of activity where flow can occur shrinks down further to just the upper-right corner of the flow diagram, as shown here.

The only way to find real flow, according to this map, is to identify a high-challenge + high-skill activity, throw yourself into it wholeheartedly, and hope that the flow state happens. No wonder flow seems so elusive for most people! But it needn't be that way. If we reframe our orientation to flow, we will discover that lots of flow moments await us—continually bubbling up from the aquifer of the ever-present flow world. The trick to gaining access to these untapped flow moments is adopting a designer's mindset—in this case, our favorite designer's mindset twofer: radical acceptance and availability.

The Flow Mindsets—Radical Acceptance and Availability

To make the experience of flow more accessible, we need to shift the source of flow from outside in, relying on an external activity-challenge pair to hold you in flow, to an inside-out orientation, relying on your mindset—in this case, acceptance and availability—to free you to fully engage in what you're doing. If you look at the competing emotions in the previous diagram (e.g., boredom, worry, etc.), you can see that flow is being prevented from occurring by the intrusion of competitive thoughts and feelings. They sound something like this...

When your skill level is above the challenge of your task...

Apathy says, "Oh, please. Do we really have to be doing this? What's the point?!"

Boredom says, "This is too easy! It's dumb to waste our talent on this. Pick something else!"

Control says, "Well, okay, if we're going to do this, how can we do it better and faster this time? Let's try to at least achieve more in doing it!"

When your skill level is below the challenge of your task...

Worry says, "Oh, I don't like this. We're in the wrong place—I'm afraid we might blow it! Be very careful."

Anxiety says, "There's no way I can do this! I always fail at this sort of thing. I'll just make a mess of it."

Stress says, "Whoa! This is exciting, but a little more than I bargained for—what do I do now?"

These thoughts and emotions function like inbound intruders stealing your attention, focus, and joy. They make it impossible for you to fully engage with what you're doing, and so prevent you from being in flow. If you listen carefully to what these antagonistic voices are saying, they are all resisting acceptance of the activity you're performing. Boredom is resisting not being fully challenged. Control is resisting just having a predictably simple experience without much effort. Worry is resisting taking the risk of making a mistake. Apathy is resisting even participating at all in something that demands less than your best. None of those states of mind are accepting the task for what it simply is—something perhaps not terribly challenging or possibly somewhat above your skill level.

But if you apply radical acceptance to any activity—radical by not accepting any distractions due to a lesser or greater challenge or being a little over- or under-skilled—you can successfully resist those intrusive reactions and in so doing retain your full

attention for the activity at hand. Radical acceptance becomes a shield against distractions, thus preserving your potential for achieving some degree of flow.

It looks like this:

The Radical Acceptance Flow Protection Shield

Now we add availability—the ready-and-willing state of mind with a positive bias toward action—to boost the deployment of our attention, the attention that acceptance has defended from distraction. Together, they look like this:

The Radical Acceptance Flow Protection Shield and the Availability Flow Booster

This diagram shows how acceptance and availability operate synergistically to give you a positive advantage. Acceptance keeps common negative intrusions at bay, availability kick-starts our engagement level, and the combination greatly increases our chances of having a flow experience.

Time to Change the Channel

By employing radical acceptance and availability, we effectively widen the flow channel and all but eliminate the boundaries to where we can access flow. The expanded flow channel looks like this:

This enlarged flow channel gives you permission to pursue a wider range of flow possibilities. There are still limitations. It is likely the case for most people that a task that is well over their skill level will induce a level of stress and anxiety that impedes flow. And some tasks that are far below our skill level will probably still bring on flow-stopping boredom for most of us. Nevertheless, this perspective significantly expands the potential for having life-affirming flow experiences.

The conventional model of flow we've been discussing so far has in practice overwhelmingly been limited to peak flow—flow induced by the intense focus that accompanies the use of our highest skill level. Peak flow is terrific! It's the best in class and a truly wonderful experience. We heartily encourage you to get yourself all the peak flow you can. We won't spend much more time on peak flow, because it is setting the bar high—too high for most of us most of the time (Bill has spent hundreds of hours in that studio with brush in hand to get to attain that peak experience, which only occurs once in a while).

Simple Flow

Our strategy is to set the bar low (or at least a little lower) so you grow your faculty for flow over time. We call it *simple flow*, and it comes in two flavors: in the moment and extended.

By simple, in-the-moment flow, we mean times of flow-like participation in the present moment that can be had almost anywhere, anytime, if we are practicing acceptance and availability. In chapter 3, we shared the two versions of Fritz's morning routine on the day of his big presentation—one lived entirely in the transactional world,

and one lived much more in the flow world. In the second version, Fritz was adopting the twofer mindsets of being available and radically accepting his situation and tapping into the experience of in-the-moment flow.

Anytime you are genuinely directing your attention to the flow world, we consider it to be time spent in flow. A brief moment of simple flow isn't as intense or impactful as a whole afternoon spent in the zone of peak flow—but it is a real and lovely experience that invites a legitimately meaningful moment. Such a simple moment can be meaningful because in that moment you are being self-transcendent. In chapter 1, we discussed how Maslow finally realized that the path to meaning-making (versus fulfillment) was through self-transcendency (versus being all you can be). Whenever you actively enter the flow world, you become a participant who is recognizing and joining in with what is happening in the world around you. That takes you beyond yourself and invites a meaning-making moment, so let's avail ourselves of all the flow we can.

When Fritz designed his morning well and engaged it with the right mindset, he was able to catch glimpses of the flow world during his wake-up song, over breakfast, on his drive to work, and especially walking through the park on the way to his building. After parking his car, when that tree in full fall colors caught his eye, he was quickly and deeply absorbed by the tree. He chose to give himself to the moment (he applied the mindset of availability), which opened up the flow world to him. He devoted his attention to his surroundings and allowed the wonder of the colors to take hold of him. He felt the rush of emotion brought on by beauty, which resulted not only in joy but in a fresh idea for his presentation later that day—a bona fide inspiration. Fritz's practice of acceptance and availability evoked a morning full of simple flow moments that—especially when strung together—gave him the experience of being more fully alive, which felt genuinely meaningful.

If some flow is good, more is better, so now let's design an extended experience of simple flow. Extended simple flow is perhaps our favorite, because it offers very close to the same intensity of flow experience as peak flow but is much more easily accessed. Extended simple flow occurs low in the flow channel, where the challenge is not very high at all. Even if you are a newbie or under-skilled at the task, there isn't much at stake, so it needn't be anxiety-producing. Let's give it a try with a basic, everyday task—chopping onions for making soup. (Bill loves chopping his way into flow.)

It's a very simple activity—just chop up a half dozen whole onions and put them in the big pot of soup stock that's simmering on the stove. You just need the onions to be diced into small chunks—not an exact size. The soup is for a family event this weekend, and you have no other obligations tonight, so you've got plenty of time and there's no rush. Time and speed are not an issue. What could be easier? Just you, a cutting board, a good kitchen knife, and some nice onions (you wisely got Vidalias and chilled them overnight, so tearing up won't be an issue). You know the basics—peel off the outer skin, halve the onion so you can lay it flat on the cut side, slice it into one-quarter- to one-third-inch-thick slices, then dice those slices roughly into cube-shaped chunks. Nothing to it, really—it will just take some time and a few hundred strokes of the knife.

This is the kind of task that rarely induces flow for most of us—in fact, usually quite

the opposite. This is just the sort of chore that just screams out for multitasking. Maybe at least we can learn something or be entertained while stuck chopping all these darn onions, so we turn on a podcast or an audiobook. That's not a bad way to chop onions, but it won't bring on flow.

To transform this mundane chore into a simple flow experience, we must first choose literally to "go with the flow" by accepting that what we're doing now is chopping onions. Period. That's it. We are a single-minded, 100 percent focused, dedicated, calm, and methodical onion chopper. No more, no less. Once we've consciously accepted and committed to the task, then it's time to get started. First thing—let's get set up. Now, get out the onions, clean off a good-size cutting board, and pull out your best kitchen knife. Lay them all out on the cutting board in an orderly manner and just look at everything. Take a good look (which costs a whopping four seconds), then pick each item up in one hand and feel it. Transfer it to the other hand, then back again, and replace it on the board. Let your eyes and hands become familiar with these three things: onions, board, knife. Get focused. These onions, this board, and this knife are your whole world for the next ten to fifteen minutes. There is nothing else you need to attend to. Nothing else need be on your mind. Every extraneous thought is deferred to another time.

Spend just a moment directing your attention at each object and appreciate what brought it to this moment in your kitchen. Those onions were grown by farmers, harvested, transported, displayed at the store, picked out and brought by you to this cutting board. These onions have known a lot of people and traversed a long path. The cutting board has a similar story. Its dozen or more laminated strips of wood come from at least three or four different types of trees grown in you've no idea what far-flung places. How many years and steps have gone by in the journey from seed to tree to lumber mill to woodshop on the way to being crafted into a board for your use here? Lastly, the knife—oh my, but the knife has traveled perhaps the farthest to get here tonight. Begun as ore deep in the earth, mined, smelted, cast, forged, and ground, with a beautiful hardwood handle added, and then the blade honed to a fine edge. Great skill and countless steps in its manufacture (steps that harken back to the very beginning of toolmaking) have brought this nicely weighted instrument that feels so good in your hand to you right now. You suddenly realize that nearly every single morsel of food that's ever passed into your mouth has probably encountered a knife somewhere in its lifetime. Life without knives is just unimaginable, you realize. Wow. Knives are cool.

The one to three minutes that this little orientation ritual took is a beautiful example of being as fully available as you can be simply to what's in front of you. It takes very little time, but it transforms your awareness and helps you zero in your attention on just what you're doing. This is how you build the *protection shield* of acceptance we diagrammed that will help you to maintain your attention to the task of chopping without yielding to the bombardment of intrusive thoughts brought on by the impatient boredom of your achieving brain. You are putting your awakened brain in charge of your attention in order to more fully enter the flow world and gain access to the flow state. This is how you use your designer's mindset to become an artful moment-maker. Having fully accepted your onion-chopping assignment and leaned deeply into it, you're ready to begin.

You peel off the outer skin to reveal the pale yellow Vidalia onion and begin cutting. You halve it and start slicing. One slice, two, three... Then the first intrusive thought arrives: *Hey, did you remember to renew the car registration? It's due soon.* But you're ready and respond softly, *Thank you for reminding me, but I'm busy chopping now. I can renew online later.* You keep slicing away. After the fifteenth slice, you start to feel a rhythm in the motion. It almost has a hum to it. You're tempted to wonder, *How does that happen?* but you let it pass and just attune yourself more closely to the slicing. You actually lean in, tilting your ear to the board to hear the sound as the blade crunches through the meat of the onion. Your hand starts noticing how different starting the cut and penetrating the outer edge of the onion feels from completing the cut and moving through the body of the onion, then stopping when the blade rocks down onto the board. You let yourself become immersed in the symphony of images, sounds, and feelings brought on by the slicing. You can't catch it all, but without a thought, you hold your breath to make sure you don't miss anything.

After all the onions are sliced, it's time to dice. You close your eyes for about five seconds, trying to remember what those onions looked like four minutes ago. Wow—they looked nothing like the pile of yellow half-round slices that now cover most of your cutting board. Big changes for those onions—all due to you and your partner, Mr. Knife. The dicing begins. Quite a different movement. It takes a few tries to get your dance steps down. In no time, the pile of little onion cubes starts mounting. They'll soon be spilling all over the floor, so you grab a bowl and scoop them up to clear some space on the board. The onions feel totally different in your two bare hands from how they do under the working edge of the knife blade. They're a little bit cool and damp, but they're crisp, and your fingers can "see" the sharp corners of the cubes. It's a nice feel. The knife is keen enough to cleanly slice—not crush—the onions, and your fingers notice. Back to dicing, and in what seems like no time, you're done. The bowl is full. You dump it into the stockpot. The whooshing plopping sound they make as the avalanche of miniature onion icebergs hits the water is both surprising and gratifying. And suddenly, it's over. You toss the trimmings, wash the bowl, wipe down the board, rinse the knife, and slide it back in the knife block on the counter.

Seventeen minutes have gone by—but it seemed like an hour (or was it just thirty seconds?). You aren't a different person. Nothing really has changed in the world, except for a few onions getting chopped into soup stock. You haven't really learned anything (except perhaps that you like your knife more than you realized). You're not really changed at all (except for some reason you are looking forward to the upcoming family dinner more than you were before). Nothing much at all has happened. And yet... you feel rather wonderful. Not *running down the street shouting* wonderful, not even *jumping up and down a few times in the kitchen* wonderful, but... *pausing momentarily to look around the room with a wry smile* kind of wonderful. *Rubbing your hands together and liking the feel of them* sort of wonderful. You've had a chance to simply engage fully in a simple task that connected you to the real world in your real body doing something real. You designed a simple flow moment and let yourself live into it, and that released more of that huge reservoir of aliveness in you. And feeling that aliveness affirms your humanity,

which is inherently meaningful and worthwhile.

When you return to that simple onion-chopping session a few days later while doing your Seventh-Day Savoring exercise (coming up in chapter 7), you notice that what you're drawn back to is that seventeen minutes with the onions. It was one of the best times of your week.

There is an old Zen proverb that describes this mindset:

Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

In-the-moment and extended simple flow opportunities are lying all over the place. Whether it's tidying your room, walking the dog, doing the dishes, washing the car, buying groceries, folding laundry, even doing your taxes (okay—neither of us has ever been in flow doing taxes, but we know people who have). From a transactional-world perspective, you just want to get stuff over and done with so you can move on to the next thing. Simple things can be aggravating to the transactional mind because they do take *some* attention and *some* time, but they don't seem like they deserve either your time or attention. In the transactional world, simple tasks are just a pain. In the flow world, they're an invitation to hidden joy.

We recommend that you allow yourself the delight of transforming simple tasks regularly by doing them in the flow world with an accepting and available mindset. If you just look, you'll discover lots of simple flow moments hiding in plain sight in your regular life, at home, and at work. Give it a try—we think you'll like having more flow be a part of your daily life.

There have been times when Bill has been operating in the flow world for weeks at a time—simple and peak flow experiences back-to-back. Of course, he's also still taking care of the necessary transactions of eating, drinking, getting on the train, and going to work. It happens to Dave, sometimes for hours, on his little sailboat with a moderate wind and smooth water. It's not hard for Dave to sail in those conditions. It's nothing like when he crews on a friend's racing sloop in big wind and a crowded pack of boats. But when Dave releases himself fully into the experience, he goes into flow.

It takes some practice, but it's doable. When you manage your mindset, any activity—not just the peak ones—can lead to flow. The possibilities are virtually endless.

Well, almost...

Not Quite Flow

Flow has sufficiently penetrated pop culture that it is sometimes conflated with other types of experiences in which people become deeply absorbed or lose all track of time. Some of these flow-adjacent experiences are complementary to flow, but some are not, so they're worth mentioning briefly, if only to avoid confusion.

Mindfulness is often associated with flow, and rightly so. Mindfulness has become a broad worldwide movement in both personal growth and organizational development. It

has its roots in multiple ancient wisdom and religious traditions and has gained modern acceptance through practice and research validation. Mindfulness practices all focus on bringing the individual into the present moment in a calm and centered state of mind. The premise is that a state of mindfulness reliably moves an individual toward an authentic expression of their true and higher self. Accordingly, mindfulness is always found in the flow world, and the condition of mindfulness reflects many of the designer's mindsets we've described here—particularly radical acceptance, wonder, and fully engaged and calmly detached. The state of mind that mindfulness practices seek to attain includes many of the classical attributes of the flow state: deep absorption, no sense of the passage of time, and a feeling of deep aliveness. Many practitioners will state simply that when they are in mindfulness, they are in flow.

We aren't going to argue with that claim, and we agree that mindfulness is a good thing. Becoming proficient in any of the many mindfulness practices is a definite advantage to someone using the ideas and tools in this book. Being more mindful—having more control over your state of mind—is consistent with becoming a better meaningful moment-maker. Some of the flow exercises we suggest in Try Stuff at the end of this chapter have their origins in mindfulness practices and traditions. That all having been said, we don't consider mindfulness and flow to be equivalent. For one thing, mindfulness is approached via meditative practices, which are quiet and still—usually inactive and done individually. Flow occurs typically during an active task or activity and can be performed either alone or collaboratively. Mindfulness relies on your attention being directed inward—removed from the outside world. Flow relies on your attention being outward—engaged with the outside world.

We don't think it is vitally important whether you conclude that mindfulness *is* flow or is just complementary to flow. We do think it's helpful to have a clear understanding of what both mindfulness and flow are in order to more effectively incorporate them into your life and daily practice.

Another case—the use of social media also has been associated with being in flow. Indeed, heavy social media users by the millions report becoming fully absorbed, totally engaged in what they're doing, and losing all track of time while using social media apps—which many claim as an experience of flow. This is something with which we disagree—the immersive experience of social media does not induce a healthy state of flow.

The massive influence of social media, especially in the lives of teens and young adults, has garnered much attention and extensive research—much of it focused on its negative, even addictive, impacts. While not attempting to fully litigate this large and complex topic, we will point out one important difference between flow and intense social media use: brain states. In her book *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, Stanford School of Medicine researcher Anna Lembke, MD, discusses how social media over-activates the addictive dopamine response cycle, resulting in compulsive behaviors that can lead to depression. Scan research indicates that the dopamine cycle is predominant during intense social media use. By contrast, the flow state has been shown to produce alpha waves in the brain (associated with relaxed yet alert state of being), which are absent in social media use. Flow does not induce compulsive or addictive

behavior, cause depression, bring about a lack of self-control, or create social isolation. No negative outcomes have been validly associated with the flow state.

Lastly, we will mention video gaming. The relationship between flow and video gaming is controversial. Some argue that gaming (like active sports) can produce a healthy state of flow. "Video games are one of the best ways to get into flow," said Kate Sweeny, professor of psychology at UC Riverside. Many video gamers play together on teams, and synchronizing the experience of gameplay through teamwork is an oft-cited flow experience by athletes in the "real world," so why not in the virtual one? Others disagree, pointing out video gaming's similarity to social media for potential negative outcomes and addictive behaviors. The debate is far from resolved and includes a potent mix of opinion and solid research. We take no specific position on this question other than to recommend honest self-evaluation. Remember that design thinking is an empirical approach that only works in reality. Accordingly, we encourage our video-gaming readers to simply take an honest look at their gaming experience and assess how it is and isn't supporting flow states, and their goal of finding more meaning and experiencing more authentic aliveness. You be the judge.

The flow world is accessible each and every moment, no matter what we are doing. And in many ways, it's more exciting than any video game could ever hope to be.

TRY STUFF

Exercise: Magic Trees (Practicing in-the-Moment Awareness)

Flow at any level and in any form depends on a high level of awareness of the present moment. In peak flow, the high degree of skill needed to meet the high level of challenge demands your maximum awareness and so helps establish the flow state. In less demanding situations, you depend on your mindset to guide you toward flow. This simple exercise helps you to practice targeting and concentrating your awareness in order to deeply engage the present moment.

Step 1: Go out in nature or a park with trees on a nice sunny day when it's calm or there's just a hint of breeze (do not do this on a windy day). Find a comfortable place to sit that affords you a good view of a landscape with full view of a number of trees (bring a folding chair if you can).

Step 2: Sit down and get comfortable. Find a sitting position that you can maintain for five to ten minutes. Scan the still life panorama in front of you back and forth slowly a few times.

Step 3: Let your eyes come to rest on one tree—one with some sky visible through and behind it. Watch it closely for at least a full minute. Fully take it into view. See all of it.

Step 4: If you have not already noticed it, look for small movements of the leaves or branches in the breeze. Keep staring until you find and recognize the motion. [*This is the magic moment. What appeared perfectly still one moment is suddenly full of tiny but undeniable motion.*[1]]

Step 5: Watch the movement for at least a minute. Catch all the different directions and pathways of motion. Notice how different leaves or branches move differently and the varying range of movement as the air shifts.

Step 6: Close your eyes for five seconds, then open them again and try to see the same tree as being motionless—just the way you first saw it (at the beginning of step 3). Notice how you can't do it—you can't see a static tree any longer. The motion has become inescapable and relentless.

Step 7: Reflect on your experience. Try to recall what it was like when you first saw the tree (motionlessly) and how you see it now. Notice how much more in the moment, how much more a part of the actual reality you are sitting in you have become by noticing the small but magical movement in the trees.

Step 8: For a few days after the exercise, in any of a wide range of typical situations (sharing a meal with someone, attending a meeting, etc.), suddenly invite yourself to "see the movement in the trees!"—meaning, look more deeply and enter the moment more fully. See what you notice and journal on it.

Step 9: Repeat as often as you like to keep your awareness at a high state of readiness.

Exercise: Flow Walking Meditation

There is evidence that movement is a simpler path to mindfulness than being still. So, for this exercise, we will give a variation on the Zen walking meditation ritual, best done in some beautiful natural place—the beach, a lake, the woods, a mountaintop, or a city park. The goal is to slow down enough to take only mindful, in-the-moment steps and to fully embrace a moment-to-moment reality.

Step 1—Choose Your Setting: Pick a peaceful, natural place where you can walk slowly without interruption—a forest path, beach, quiet trail, or a calm city park.

Step 2—Set Your Intention: Before you begin, pause. Take a deep breath and silently set an intention: *I'm here to connect with the present moment, one step at a time.*

Step 3—Walk Slowly and Silently: Begin walking at half your normal pace. Slow everything down. No need to force a rhythm—let your breath and your steps find each other naturally.

Step 4—Focus on Sensation: Feel your foot lift, move through the air, and make contact with the ground. Notice how your weight shifts. Tune in to the textures underfoot, the air on your skin, the sounds around you.

Step 5—Let Go of Goals: You're not walking to *get* somewhere. You're walking to be somewhere. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the next step. And then the next. Stop and re-ground your awareness if you get too distracted; start walking again when you are ready.

Step 6—Use Your Breath as an Anchor: Inhale as you take a few steps. Exhale as you take a few more. Let your breath keep you tethered to the moment. If thoughts come, thank them, release them—and return to your breath and next step.

Step 7—Stay for Ten to Twenty Minutes: You can do this practice for as little as ten minutes or stretch it longer. The goal isn't duration—it's depth. When you feel complete, stop walking, close your eyes, and take three deep, grateful breaths.

Step 8—Reflect Briefly: Afterward, ask yourself: *How do I feel now compared to before I began?* Don't analyze—just notice.

Exercise: Take a Sniffari (Sniff Walk)

Canine behavior specialists suggest that fifteen to twenty minutes of daily olfactory exploration provides a dog mental stimulation comparable to an hour of physical exercise, significantly reduces stress, enhances cognitive function, and fulfills crucial natural instincts. Dogs are olfactory animals, and giving them the chance to broadly activate their scent-based brains by letting them stop and take in whatever smells they desire at their own pace makes them happy and enhances well-being. Humans are largely sight-based animals, but we have other senses as well. We do ourselves a favor to give our senses a chance to show us more of the world (and ourselves), and in so doing help us to engage the flow world right in front of us and experience more aliveness.

Step 1: Plan a twenty-minute walk with no distractions, preferably in an outdoor area where a variety of smells may be encountered, such as a park or garden, the mountains, the ocean, or even an industrial area, shopping mall, or urban downtown. (As your dog will tell you, it doesn't have to be nice smells—just interesting ones, but no noxious or toxic smells, please.)

Step 2: Decide where your walk is going to start. Stand still at your "starting line," and close your eyes and just breathe normally for a minute. Let your attention shift from your eyes to your nose. Start paying attention to what your nose is picking up. It's time to think like a dog.

Step 3: Once you've got scent at the front of your awareness, start walking slowly while breathing easily and sniffing the air looking for any distinctive smells. As soon as you pick up a new scent, stop and let your nose zoom in on it to try to fully capture the smell. If you can name the smell, great, but no problem if you can't. Just try to embed the memory of the scent before you move on.

Step 4: Repeat step 3 as many times as you can in fifteen minutes. Be sure to linger at each scent to try to fully capture each smell and the nuances between different smells. Don't rush.

Step 5: After about fifteen minutes, reverse direction and return to your starting line the same way you came, only now walking "normally" using sight-based awareness (sight-walking is much faster than sniff-walking, so you won't need as long to get back). As you retrace your steps, try to recall the different smells as you pass by each place where you'd lingered and sniffed. See if you can both "see" and "smell" simultaneously as you walk back (which demands a high level of engagement with your present moment).

Step 6: When you get back to where you started, sit down (on a bench, in your car, or just on the ground), close your eyes, and savor your walk for one to two minutes. Take note of how you feel and your sense of aliveness and well-being. Make an entry in your journal if you maintain one.

Variations: Try this exercise using sound or even touch. We caution against doing it with taste out in the wild, but you might be able to do it with taste at a farmers market or a street fair with lots of food vendors. Just give yourself a chance to experience being more human by using more of your human faculties.

WARNING—Don't Attempt to Keep Up with Your Dog: If you have a dog, you may be tempted to take your dog on a sniffari (a great idea) and see if you can just go along smelling the scents that your dog is sniffing out (a lousy idea). A

dog's sense of smell is ten thousand to one hundred thousand times more sensitive than yours, and dogs can sniff five to ten times per second—five times faster than you. So… don't go there. We're just unable to keep up with what our dogs are smelling.

Exercise: Peak Flow Reflection

We can't really give you an exercise to achieve peak flow. Peak flow requires you to perform an activity that demands your maximum skill to respond to a high level of challenge. That's something we can encourage you to seek, but we can't prescribe it for you. You've got to find that activity and develop that level of skill yourself. Again—we're big advocates of peak flow and encourage you to develop activities where you experience it. After hundreds of hours invested in the studio, Bill regularly can achieve peak flow with his brush in his hand working on a big canvas. After thousands of miles of careful skill-building, Dave can drop totally into the zone on his motorcycle zipping through serpentine turns on tight mountain highways. So please do find your all-absorbing, skill-demanding activity and let the peak flow *flow*.

While we can't give you an exercise to achieve peak flow, we can give you an exercise to get more out of it or even reprise it, which brings us to the Peak Flow Reflection:

Step 1: Recall a time when you experienced a high level of peak flow while doing something that demanded your full skill and attention. (It can be anything—sports, performing music, working on a totally absorbing project, etc.)

Step 2: Remember the experience, and as much as possible, don't just remember it but *reenter* it and *relive it* again, as close to the original experience as you can. (In some instances, you can actually reenter the flow state if you let your imagination fully take you into the experience. This is great when it happens, but don't expect it regularly.)

Step 3: As you relive it, slow it down in your memory and let yourself experience it even more deeply than you were able to when it actually happened at real-time speed. (This exercise is a variation on the Seventh-Day Savoring exercise in chapter 7. Savoring is a powerful tool that can be used in a variety of ways.)

Step 4: Write your relived reflection (preferably by hand).

Step 5: Read the reflection over to yourself, once silently and then a second time out loud. Notice any differences between those two readings.

Step 6: Later that day (or within a day or two), read it aloud to a friend, partner, or family member. Notice how the story feels when read to someone else compared to just reading it to yourself.

Step 7: Add any notable observations from the readings in steps 5 and 6 to your written reflection.

Step 8: Lastly, just take a moment to hold that flow moment and enjoy it one more time—more fully than ever.

Exercise: Flip the World Switch

See the Flip the World Switch exercise in chapter 3. It provides a quick and easy technique for making a simple flow moment in almost any situation.

Exercise: Just This (Extended Simple Flow)
This exercise provides the step-by-step process for making an extended simple flow moment out of doing "just this" as illustrated by Bill's onion-chopping example.

Preparation

Step 1—Define the Task: Select what task/activity you're going to do. Be specific. Choose a good "just this" activity that is simple and leaves room for you to engage with it thoroughly and without undue thought or stress.

Step 2—Set the Stage: Gather all the needed equipment (if any) and have it ready to go at the appointed time for your activity. Be sure you have access to the space necessary to do it. Prearrange things so nothing impedes the activity once it begins.

Step 3—Make Time and Clear the Decks: Schedule time for the activity. Leave plenty of time so you needn't rush and your activity won't conflict with anything else you or others may be doing. Anticipate and eliminate possible interruptions so that once the activity begins you can do it nonstop without disruption.

Execution

Step 1—Get Ready, Get Set: At the appointed time and place, arrange whatever materials and tools will be needed for the activity (e.g., onions, cutting board, knife, counter space, apron, bowl).

Step 2—Go with the Flow: As you start the activity, close your eyes for a moment and dedicate yourself fully to be in this moment and participate in doing just this and nothing else. (This is where you erect your shield of acceptance that you'll use to hold off intrusive thoughts and resist distraction.)

Step 3—Stop, Look, and Appreciate: Before you begin the activity, let your eyes and hands gaze at your setup and appreciate what was involved in bringing everything together for this moment. Let that appreciation focus your attention and activate your availability to lean into what you're about to do.

Step 4—Start: Begin the activity. Give it a little time to get your rhythm going.

Step 5—Be the Ball and Get into It: Intensify your focus as the activity continues. Think less *about* what you're doing and more just *be* what you're doing. (This is what sports psychology means by "be the ball"—don't think about what you're doing; just attend to the doing of it.)

Step 6—Direct Your Spare Attention—Take the Sensory Tour: The activity is simple, so you will likely be unable to put *all* your attention into just doing it. Accept that fact and be available to direct your spare attention in a way that enhances flow potential. For example, don't ask yourself, "Am I using the knife the best way?" Ask instead, "How exactly does the knife feel throughout the

slicing motion?" To direct spare attention to what you're doing (instead of criticizing or analyzing it), "take the sensory tour." Allow each appropriate sense to take in what's happening. How does the knife feel? How do the onions look and smell? What is the sound on the cutting board?

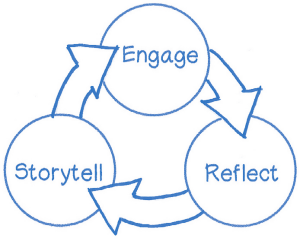
Step 7—Finish: Continue the activity until it's done (either the task is completed or the allocated time is expired).

Step 8—Stop, Look, and Appreciate: Repeat step 3, now reflecting on the completed activity and any results thereof (e.g., diced onions simmering in the pot).

Step 9—Celebrate Your "Just This" Particularity: Cap off the experience by celebrating the simple joy of having participated in this particular activity. Clap your hands or congratulate yourself out loud—or, if possible, share it briefly with someone else.

---

1 Dave has been doing this exercise for decades and has never not found the moment when the trees seemingly suddenly come to life to be anything other than miraculous. It always astonishes him once he sees the movement how he could have ever missed it—and how clearly more attentive he is when he's fully aware of the motion.



Description 11

them have families they are close to. These are people who have lots of people in their big, full lives—lives they self-report as being deeply networked and well supported for decades.

Asking his "tell me more" question, year after year, allowed Dave to discover what it is that these DCI fellows are finding in their Stanford cohort that is so different from all their other highly successful community experiences. Based on this work, we've concluded that people typically form groups for one of three very different reasons: to have a good time together (a social community); to get something done together (a collaborative community); or to become better together (a formative community). It turned out that while the DCI fellows had lots of experience in vibrant social and collaborative communities, most of these people had never been in a formative community until they came to DCI. And they loved it.

What distinguishes a formative community is that it's not transactional. Collaborative communities have a clear goal—hit that sales target, complete that project on time, improve that group of students' test scores. Working hard together on a shared goal is very life-affirming and satisfying and a necessary part of almost everyone's lives. For many people, the bonds formed with collaborators with whom they've labored long and hard on big challenges—like starting a company or building a house or serving in the military—are the strongest relationships of their lives.

Social communities exist for the members to enjoy one another's company and share experiences. While the ultimate purpose of the group may be relational, the practical focus is frequently on the actual events shared (e.g., the dinner out, the road trip, the movie night, which are each a type of transaction). At the end of most social community gatherings, the participants know if the activity "worked" or not depending on whether everyone "had a good time." Such social communities are wonderful, and sharing and enjoying life together with others is an essential and meaningful aspect of life. However, the time invested, while enjoyable and even life-giving, may not leave the participants *better*. And that's where a formative community comes in.

A formative community is distinct, offering unique benefits—something the DCI fellows discovered repeatedly. Most groups center around shared *content*, like technology in a software company or screenwriting in a film class. Formative communities, however, focus on shared *intent*—the collective aim to become more human. This emphasis transcends career paths, expertise, or interests, fostering diverse communities across ages and backgrounds.

DCI fellows pursued vastly different passions, from economic justice to AI to poetry, yet they weren't united by a transactional or performance-based goal. Instead, they shared a commitment to helping one another grow into more authentic versions of themselves. Their purpose wasn't to "win" at DCI but to support one another in leading purposeful lives. This formative community existed solely for that reason—and its impact was profound.

Simply put, a formative community is one where members help shape one another. The critical elements of a formative community are:

- Everyone has made a core commitment to growing their way forward to become more coherently and authentically human, and to help others do the same.
- There are regular and consistent interactions—the group spends time together communicating and sharing experiences.
- There is a shared construct or methodology that guides the process the community uses to sustain itself.
- The group persists for a sufficient period of time to form trusted relationships.

Getting More, Becoming More

A primary claim of this book is that more meaning is waiting for you right there in the life you are already living. Our suggestion is that by applying a designer's mindset and instituting some of these practices, you can *get more out of life without having to cram more into it*. The chief purpose of a formative community is to do just that—help the community members get more out of life. The foundational regimen that enables a formative community to deliver on that promise is a simple three-step practice: Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S):

This is the practice that all members of a formative community group perform on an ongoing basis and which informs the community's conversation. *Engage* simply means go out in the world and do stuff. Go to work, feed the kids, have some flow, read a book, put on your wonder glasses, take your neighbor some flowers, do the dishes.

Reflect is the next step in the process. Set aside time, typically weekly, to reflect on what you've been doing. Review your week and journal about your experiences, especially those that shine a little brighter in your memory. Perhaps during the week some questions came up, and maybe you had an insight or a moment of wonder—write it down. You don't have to be long-winded or profound; you just have to write down an honest, regular reflection.

Reflection is the critical step. Without it, nothing that follows will work. With it, everything falls into place. While we're not sure we agree with Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living," we do know for sure that regular reflection is crucial to getting more out of life and building a successful formative community. Why? Because a formative community meeting is like a potluck dinner—everybody needs to bring a dish to share so everyone gets fed. The "dish" each member brings is their reflection, which isn't hard to prepare—it only takes a few minutes a week, but it makes all the difference. And once prepared, you share it by telling your story.

Storytell is the next step in this circular process. The story we're recommending you tell is simply the storyline of your ongoing reflection. A formative community is the place where that story gets told and nurtured. It's a place not only where others hear you but where you can hear yourself. When you hear your own story as you share it with others who are receiving it graciously and you see your story being regarded in the welcoming faces of your compatriots, your story becomes more meaningful and real to you. This community-based practice of Engage-Reflect-Storytell empowers the designer's mindset of *create your world*. When you actively take responsibility for what the unfolding story of

your life is, your story becomes richer and your world more interesting. Telling that story in community is an important part of making it real. We are social animals, and we can't experience the fullness of ourselves by ourselves. The stories of wonder, coherence, and flow that you tell and the questions about life you disclose become more real and more valuable through the group's validation. The listeners benefit as well. Listening empathically to another person's stories of meaning-making moments invites us into something precious in that person's life—it makes us more human. It's so simple, and it's so transformative.

If a formative community group did nothing more than regularly perform the Engage-Reflect-Storytell practice, it would be a thoroughly worthwhile experience. But it can be so much more.

Remember the Be-Do-Become model and the definition of the human person as a becoming from chapter 2? A formative community is simply a group of becomers walking alongside one another in their journey of becoming. Just what is it we're *becoming*? Simply our more authentic, more coherent, more alive selves. We'll never be done *becoming*. Isn't that great?! That means that life is going to stay interesting forever, as long as we pay attention and stick to our practice of designing a more meaningful way to live in community.

Living the Question

For some people, life is about rehearsing their answers—figuring out how to effectively apply what they understand and what they know in whatever situation they find themselves. For others, life is about living their questions—discerning what new inquiry may move them along to the next lesson that life is inviting them to learn. People in a formative community are intrigued to discover and explore those next questions and next learnings. They're not only open and available; they are also actively looking for the next invitation. They like to enjoy life now as much as anyone (in fact, they're experts at getting more out of the present moment), but they don't stop there. Their commitment to "living the question" is what fuels them and keeps them going on the journey of becoming. We call the particular question you are living into at any particular time your "focus question."

Your focus question is the question that life is posing to you now about who you are becoming during this season of your life. The time frame of a focus question can be as short as a few months to as long as a few years or even a decade. The idea of a focus question is a new one for most people—and best understood by example.

Meet Harmony. At forty-nine, she was an accomplished international executive and entrepreneur with a long track record of building things that matter. After years in the fast-paced start-up world, she took a leadership role at a mission-driven US nonprofit—a way to stay grounded while her two sons finished high school. The plan was to press Pause, catch her breath, and be present for this final stretch of hands-on parenting. But as her youngest prepared to leave for college and the house grew quieter, something stirred. A new idea. A spark. The beginning of what just might be her next big leap.

Harmony found herself at a crossroads, facing a major life and career question: Should she go all in on her new start-up idea—and return to those sixty-plus-hour workweeks—or stay in her fulfilling (but less stimulating) thirty-five-to-forty-hour-a-week corporate role? With her youngest about to leave for college, she knew she'd soon have more time. But where would she invest it—into her career, or into her homelife, especially her marriage? Her relationship with Dale was solid, but after two decades of kids and careers, it had often taken a back seat.

On the surface, the choice seemed straightforward: Stay the course or leap into the start-up. But the truth ran deeper. The clock was ticking—if she didn't move on her idea soon, someone else might. Nearing fifty, Harmony felt at the top of her professional game, and if she was ever going to build something new, now was the moment. At the same time, she also felt a deep pull toward her marriage, knowing this next season—post-parenting—was often a make-or-break stretch for couples. She wanted to create something meaningful with Dale, something fresh and intentional. But she also couldn't shake the feeling that this new company idea might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And that tension—between building something new professionally or investing more deeply in her personal life—was exactly where she stood.

What to do?

Harmony's situation helps us discern an important distinction between two separate things: a presenting problem and a focus question. Let's take them one at a time. A *presenting problem* is just that—a problem that life has presented to you that demands a solution. Presenting problems are usually transactional in nature and can vary anywhere from minor to life-changing in scope and impact, and almost always feel rather urgent (if not emergent).

Most of us upon encountering such a problem want nothing more than to solve it, and the sooner, the better. In Harmony's case, the presenting problem was simple: which career path to take—stick with her nonprofit corporate job or launch the start-up. The way to resolve that problem would be to analyze which is the better option by working through all the relevant issues: *Which one's more interesting? Which one has a bigger impact in the world? Which one makes more money? Which one is a better use of my skills? Which one could be deferred to a later time more easily? Which one is more likely to succeed?* And so on. These are all appropriate considerations, but they are largely transactional issues and represent transactional-world thinking. While "Which job?" is an important thing to resolve, that problem-solving question won't help Harmony get at the bigger life issues at stake here.

Focus questions get at not just what's the best option or how something will work but where you are headed and who you are becoming. Stepping back and looking at her situation through the lens of "Who am I becoming?" completely reframed Harmony's thinking. She realized that if she was going to dedicate up to the next ten years of her life to her next career move, then she'd be exiting this job at sixty. It struck her that she may very well not take another big-career job at that age, so this next decision could be the biggest career decision of the rest of her life. That realization opened up what issue was actually most at stake for her in this decision, which wasn't her career. Harmony knew

that she tended to throw herself 110 percent into her work, so where she worked, with whom she worked, and what she was working on all had a profound impact on her personal development and growth. That meant that who she would be by the age of sixty would be hugely influenced by what type of work she did in the coming decade. These reflections formed Harmony's focus question to be, "In this next crucial decade of my life, how do I want my career to contribute to who I will be at sixty?" Having that question foremost in her mind for the next six months helped focus her attention on what really mattered. It enabled her to assess what her work life meant to her and identify what she loved and didn't love on the intense days at work that were more start-up-like. It reminded her to tune in to her marriage and imagine what she wanted with Dale. As is often the case, there was no right or wrong answer—just very different ways to live. She of course continued to do her due diligence on her options, but her focus question kept her attention on what truly mattered.

In one of her formative community meetings, someone made the observation, "You know, you keep talking about who you'll be at sixty. I'm wondering, given what a priority you say the marriage is for you in all this, what if your question was, 'What will *we* be like at sixty?'" That feedback nudged Harmony to better hone her focus question (which is just the sort of contribution a formative community can make). It led her to ask Dale more about how he felt about the start-up option—and not just what he'd like to do together if they had more time. To her surprise, Dale said, "Actually, I think it'd be okay if you did it. Sure, I'd love to spend more time with you now that the kids are out of the house. And start-ups are hard—really hard—but my favorite thing is to see you shine. You are just amazing when you're creating something, and the truth is, you love this new idea of yours. No, I won't like seeing less of you for the next few years, but the version of you I will get to see is worth the wait. I'd like to enter our sixties married to the happiest version of Harmony there is. It's up to you, but I'm with you either way."

In Harmony's example, her presenting problem (which career path to take) and her focus question (who she wants to be at sixty) were closely linked, which is often the case but not always. The presenting problem facing Greg, one of our former students, was which grad school admission to accept—the one from the top-rated private school with no financial assistance or the one from the public school with a generous scholarship. Which school to attend was an important problem to solve, an important transactional question to answer, but it wasn't his focus question. As part of his grad school evaluation, he'd spoken with lots of recent alumni who were five to ten years into their careers. What he heard in those conversations that made the biggest impression on him had very little to do with which graduate program the person had attended and had everything to do with the quality of mentoring they'd received during and following grad school. Many of the alumni he met described how they would not be the person they had become were it not for the support and wise input of their mentors. So, his focus question was, "What is mentoring uniquely able to teach me, and how do I find good mentoring?" Living thoughtfully into that question over the next few years proved to have a profound impact on his life, especially in terms of forming his professional ethics and decision-making process. Meanwhile, he solved the transactional problem of which school to attend based

on finances. Once he concluded that what he most valued in his education came not from the classroom but from mentorship, he was free to simply get the most cost-effective, competent training available, so he chose the public school for its affordability. Greg's example paints a clear distinction between an important transactional problem to be solved (which grad school to attend)—which, while important, is not formative—and a genuine focus question (what mentoring could mean for him)—which, when lived into, can and will be powerfully formative. Presenting problems deserve to be solved, but they do not deserve to take all our attention, and far too often, they do exactly that. Most of Greg's classmates spent all their energy on which grad school to attend, assuming that picking the right school was all they had to do to "make it." They were just solving their next problem. Greg was taking charge of forming his life.

Choosing to pursue a life of becoming—a life of ongoing personal growth, learning, and maturation—takes effort and focus. That's what a focus question is there for—simply to help us keep looking and moving ahead by not only solving problems but by becoming our better selves.

The Double Agenda

If what we're recommending is that you identify your focus question, live into it, and use it as a key tool in sustaining an effective formative community, then why are we discussing all these presenting problems as well? Because, just like Harmony and Greg, we all have them. Problems are unavoidable and will constantly vie for as much attention as they can get. The result is that problems can easily hijack your attention away from your focus question. Socrates reminded us to live the examined life, but he didn't have to remind us to solve our problems, because problems constantly remind us of themselves. We are making the distinction between your presenting problems (found in your transactional-world life) and your focus question (found in your flow-world life) so you don't lose sight of your focus question. Focus questions only rarely have a deadline, like in Harmony's case, so they are easily deferred to another day and soon forgotten. It's easy to feel like the big problem is the only thing we can afford to be thinking about, but if we let problem-solving consume our lives, we'll end up years later the same person we always were—just with a stockpile of solved problems. If you want to become a better, more interesting, more authentic version of yourself, have a more meaning-full life, you need to preserve some time and energy for your formation. Becoming is never urgent, though it is crucial. Focus questions almost never have a deadline, though they are always timely. The only way your formation will ever get any attention is by choosing to make it a priority. That said, we can't ignore the problems either—presenting problems are important and demand to be addressed. Which is why all formative community groups need to serve a double agenda: formation and problem-solving.

The primary purpose of a formative group is to help the members get more meaning out of their current lives and support one another's ongoing becoming projects. In addition, the group can be a great resource to provide support and insight for problem-solving *when necessary*. It's only natural to bring life's challenges to these trusted people

who you know have your best interests at heart. The key is to not let the problem-solving and advice-giving dominate the conversation. If that happens, your formative community may unintentionally turn into a collaborative community—one gathered around the task of helping to get one another's presenting problems solved. That's not a bad thing! Having a team of dedicated problem-solvers committed to making your life better can be wonderful. But it's not the same as a formative community in which we explicitly are committed to furthering one another's becoming our better selves, not just our solved selves. So, do help one another to solve those unavoidable problems that arise, but stay vigilant to protect and nurture each other's becoming and progress in addressing your focus questions. Don't keep falling for the beguiling next problem. Life has an endless supply of them, and they're not all as urgent as they claim, so tell some of them they'll have to wait. Expect the right balance between the formative conversation and the solution-seeking conversation to shift depending on the members' circumstances and manage accordingly. As long as the formative conversation is kept front and center in the group's practice and never abandoned, the group will continue to be a meaningful experience. Groups that slide off into all problem-solving are helpful, but they're not meaningful. Helpful is fine, but it's more meaning and purpose that we're really after, so let's keep our eyes on the prize.

Welcome to the Collective

Dave has seen how valuable formative community was for the people participating in the Stanford DCI fellowship program. But those people took an entire year off to think about their future, take classes, roam the campus, and have lots of engaging conversations. Could regular busy people build formative community, too? Our work with a DCI alum, Baden, showed us that the answer to that question is a resounding *yes*.

After completing the DCI program, Baden's formative community group continued meeting on Zoom, because they all valued the experience so much. Baden loved it and was sure that lots of people could benefit from being in such a group, even if they couldn't take a year off at Stanford. Baden was involved in entrepreneurship and venture investing, which brought him into contact with lots of different people. He kept asking anyone who would listen, "Are you interested in talking about where your life is going and what you're learning? Would you want to be in a community that focused on those sorts of things?" And many of them did. So, Baden invited them to be a part of a new community that he just called the Collective. He didn't push it; he was patient and wanted to see how many and what kinds of people were interested. After a few years, there were over three hundred people in the Collective, and very different kinds of people from all over the world: college kids, retirees, bankers, tech geeks, accountants, small-business owners, big corporate execs, singles, parents—you name it. And they were all people who wanted to grow and learn from one another and find more meaning and purpose. The Collective started slowly—putting on a few webinars, hosting some regional meetups, and so on. Eventually, Baden came to Dave and asked him to run a six-month pilot program of small formative community groups of Collective members. Dave jumped at the chance to see if formative

communities worked as well for far-flung, busy working people as for DCI fellows.

Baden put Collective members in intergenerational groups of five or six people who didn't know one another, spanning a wide range of ages, walks of life, and cultural backgrounds. All they had in common was the desire to try being in a formative community to get more out of their lives and progress as growing, becoming people. The participants were all trained on the Designer's Way mindsets and the key ideas in this book. Dave assigned everyone to do their compass (chapter 5) and to start their Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) practice by doing regular reflection journaling. In each group's first meeting, members shared their compass and the story of why they joined the group and what they were hoping for out of the experience. Everyone found that conversation very stimulating and was ready to come back for more. Next, he assigned them to write their focus question and discuss with their groups how they chose their question and what "living into their becoming" meant to them. As the weeks progressed, Dave encouraged the participants to do the Coherency Sightings Log (chapter 5) regularly, to try the Put On Your Wonder Glasses exercise (chapter 4) and do Sudden Savorings (in the Try Stuff section of this chapter) to complement their ongoing E-R-S practice.

It took a while to get comfortable with the formative agenda of "just" noticing more and getting more out of life and not collaborating to achieve something or make decisions. Most of the groups noticed how presenting problems came up regularly and could sometimes dominate the conversation. Eventually, all the groups developed a solid rhythm and balance and discovered that telling their reflection stories first and putting the problem-solving at the end was an effective approach. An interesting trend became clear over time. Both the problem-solving and formative, reflective conversations were engaging, and either would easily take all the group's time if allowed. However, when problem-solving was given extra discussion time, the ideas didn't get much better, they just took more time. When focus questions, reflection, and becoming were given more time, the conversation got deeper and more satisfying. The conclusion was that deep conversation gets deeper, and shallow (even important) conversation stays shallow. The moral of that story: Identify worthy problem-solving topics up front, but discuss them last after prioritizing time for formative conversation. As long as the groups maintained a healthy diet of formative time, the experience was life-giving and meaningful. People in the pilot started reporting how the community was impacting their lives. For instance...

Alain, a hard-charging MBA, was in the midst of a thorny process of taking over the family business from his dad. He was having a difficult time getting his dad to step back. Then things changed unexpectedly when he did the compass exercise and started the practice of taking coherency sightings. He noticed that while his father was quite different from himself, his dad had clear values and ran the company very coherently. That made Alain more grateful for his dad and more appreciative of the legacy of integrity his dad had built. What the coherency sightings did was redirect some of Alain's attention, which was entirely focused on transactional concerns about the company, toward the flow world of what was actually going on with his dad and the staff. Without saying a word, that shift in Alain's mindset changed not only what he was seeing and noticing but changed how he was being present to his father and the employees. It eased the tensions that had been

building up between Alain and his dad. Then, without being asked, his dad started to loosen his grip on the reins and began handing over responsibilities to Alain.

Rona, an independent financial adviser who had been hard at work building her business for twenty years, wondered if she'd finally grown the firm enough and no longer had to constantly try to expand. She decided that her focus question was, "If I accepted that I am successful—that I have enough—what freedom would that give me?" A few group meetings after sharing that focus question, she told this story:

> At the end of the day last Wednesday, I got a call from one of my more difficult clients. I've never really enjoyed working with him, but for years, I've given him extra attention in hopes of growing his account. As I picked up the phone, my focus question came to mind. Suddenly, I knew. I knew that the freedom I wanted to exercise was the freedom not to work with this client directly. I politely told him that it was good to hear from him but I couldn't talk because I was leaving the office for the day. Then I told him that I was doing a reorganization and I would no longer be handling his account. Sarah on my staff would be taking care of him from now on, and she would get back to him next week. Then I said goodbye and hung up. Then I cried. I had never done that before in my entire career—taken care of myself instead of the client—and it was about time. Then I took myself out to dinner.

Pax was a third-year college student. He wasn't sure what his focus question should be, so he decided just to reflect for a few weeks on "What am I becoming?"—a question he'd never asked himself before. What he concluded was that at nineteen, he was already becoming a failure. There always seemed more to do than he could get done, and he was pretty sure things would stay that way, because it didn't look like life after college would be any easier. The voice inside his head barked, *I'll never achieve my way out of this!* While relating this story to his group, he realized that "what I need to become is more forgiving of my limitations," so he started working on applying the designer's mindset of radical acceptance, including accepting himself. In very short order, he was enjoying life more than he had in years.

Harmonic Resonance

Those are the sorts of stories we hear all the time about the transformations, big and small, that can happen in a formative community. In a matter of weeks, people in Baden's small group pilot project were helping one another have more meaningful lives and to live into becoming their better selves. One reason a formative community has this sort of impact in people's lives relies on something we call *harmonic resonance*.

Scientifically speaking, if two things in proximity share the same natural frequency and one of them is vibrating, the other one will start vibrating, too. For example, two tuning forks will vibrate in sympathy if they are tuned to the same note, the same frequency.

In a formative community, the "frequency" that we're trying to get the group to vibrate at is human coherency and authenticity—each individual acting and becoming

more fully themselves. Whether it's in sharing a small but meaningful moment of flow or announcing a breakthrough insight related to a focus question, those stories produce the resonant frequency of someone being more in tune with the world, others, and themselves. The sound of someone else's authentic resonance can animate our own. This is why it is the *intent* (authenticity and coherence), not the *content* (e.g., politics, climate change, or parenting teenagers), of a formative community that makes it a powerful experience. It wasn't important that Alain's, Rona's, and Pax's stories of growing and becoming were so different in nature. What mattered was being in community with people sharing their progress in living more meaningfully.

The Long Game

A common question that arises is: "How long can we expect to keep this up?" Just how long can a formative community continue to be useful and stimulating to its participants, particularly when it doesn't have any clear transactional end goal in mind? Well, with the right people and the right commitment—for decades. We know this to be true, as we have both been in such a group almost all our adult lives.

A few decades ago, Bill joined a group of men who get together every Sunday to talk about being a man in the modern era. Bill knows the exact date because it was the same year that his son Ben was born, 1994. The coincidence is no accident: Bill joined this group of men, most of whom are older than he was, seeking advice on how to be a good father and raise a healthy son. This formative community has been life changing for Bill.

Dave formed his group TD3 (Tom and 3 Daves) in 1974 before graduating college. Their purpose was to support one another in coherently living out their values until the day they die. TD3 celebrated their fiftieth anniversary with a weeklong retreat during the year we were working on this book.

With nearly a century of experience between us in these kinds of groups, we speak with a deep and highly informed conviction that a strong formative community can go the distance with you in life. Both of us will say that our participation in these groups is one of the single most meaningful and impactful things we have ever done. If you are fortunate enough to be a part of building such a group, it can make a tremendous difference in your life.

It's well worth it. So, let's get started.

TRY STUFF: PART 1—DESIGNING A FORMATIVE COMMUNITY

Starting a formative community group isn't as hard as you might think, and… it's fun! While a group of four to six is nice, a group of three works beautifully. So, all you need to do is find just two other people who are willing to give it a try. (You can make a pair work, but a threesome is much more dynamic, so try for at least three people if possible.) Remember, your group members don't have to have a shared interest or activity (e.g., golf, pasta-making, or Japanese sci-fi novels), or be in a similar life situation (e.g., married with kids, in college,

recently retired), or be similar ages; they just need a shared desire to get more meaning out of life and a willingness to reflect on their experiences and participate authentically in community. It's great if they're geographically close enough that you can meet in person, but it's not critical. Most of the formative communities we know meet on Zoom very successfully.

We suggest a low-key approach, taking one step at a time. There's no need to rush or push it—take your time and enjoy the process. First, just list all the people you know who might be willing to have these sorts of conversations. If you're like most people we've met, a few likely candidates will quickly bubble up to the top of your list. Then over the next few weeks, be on the lookout for an opportunity with each of those people individually to mention that you're thinking of starting a formative community group to discuss what makes life more worthwhile and share meaningful experiences, and are wondering if they'd be willing to give it a try. Tell them that it's not a big commitment; you're just going to prototype it for a while and see how it goes. We recommend three to six months with meetings of sixty to ninety minutes every two or three weeks. It's hard to build trust if your meetings are four or more weeks apart, and meeting every week is too demanding for most people. An every two- or three-week frequency is the sweet spot for most groups. A good prototype should last for at least six meetings (nine is better) to afford the group enough time for community to form and develop a rhythm to your practice. If you're clear about your initial invitation and the commitment isn't too big and scary, we think you've got a very good chance of at least finding two other people who are willing to join you for your prototype. Once you've got your participants, it's time to start meeting.

Meeting #1: Get Organized: In your first meeting—which is great to do as a dinner if you're all local—your goal is just to get to know one another, review what the group is for and how it works, and confirm who's going to participate. Be clear what the members need to do for the group to succeed and what the initial assignments are, and answer any questions (as best you can). After everyone is clear what's involved, ask if they're game to be in the prototype group, and if two or more say yes—you've got a group!

Lastly, set the schedule for your meetings, which is usually the hardest part. It's far easier to do scheduling in person than by email, so do your best to have a schedule in place before that first organizing meeting ends. We can't overemphasize the importance of committing to the schedule. Everyone is busy, but making time to meet is critical. If participation in the early weeks is weak and spotty, the group formation will suffer and may never recover.

Start-Up Homework Assignment: You want to establish some common ground right away. You want everyone to arrive at the next meeting with two things:

- their compass (see chapter 5)
- their focus question (or a few alternative draft focus questions for group discussion)

Meeting #2: Lay the Foundation: This meeting is dedicated to hearing one

another's compasses and discussing focus questions. The goal is that everyone learns what matters to each member and understands where everyone is in their journey of *becoming*. This meeting provides a crucial foundation that enables the members to actually become a formative community—one that supports each member authentically. With the initial assignments completed and shared, the group should now begin the Engage-Reflect-Storytell practice that will be the bread-and-butter of future meetings. Remind the members that your meetings are "potlucks," where success depends on everyone bringing something to share from their E-R-S practice.

Meeting #3 and Thereafter: By the third meeting, the group rhythm and momentum should be building. You can work from the agenda provided below but expect that your group will evolve how it spends its time. Just be sure to watch out for everyday problems encroaching and taking too much time away from the formative community and focus question conversation. Make a habit of regularly checking in with the group on what's working and what needs adjustment.

Last Prototype Meeting: At the last meeting of the community for your group prototype, take stock of how the experience has been for everyone, and discuss where you want to go from here. Does the group want to continue, and if so, for how long? Be flexible; each group handles future commitments differently. One of the DCI alumni groups committed right from the start to continue meeting every week, indefinitely. Another group of early-career young adults that Dave led would only commit to six weeks at a time, but did so over twenty-five times and stayed together for nearly three years.

Formative Community Meeting Agenda

This agenda covers all the elements that may arise in a formative community meeting. It presumes the meeting runs ninety minutes and is easily adjusted for anything from one to two hours. Not all elements would appear in all meetings; notably, the focus question update may not happen in every meeting, and problem-solving occurs only as needed and not dominantly.

Check-In (1–2 minutes each, 3–10 minutes total)

- Three words that characterize how I am as I arrive today.
- Any individual requests for what to address at today's meeting (e.g., a problem-solving request or an important update).

Engage-Reflect-Storytell Sharing (20–30 minutes)

- Each member shares one to three key reflections they captured since the last meeting and what insights or questions arose from them.
- While listening during this time, each member is keeping track of:
  - Things said to which you'd like to ask, "Tell us more about…"
  - Things surfaced which seem interesting to discuss together
  - Things that are confusing or new to you that you'd like to understand

better

- When everyone has completed one cycle of "storytelling" their reflections, the invitation is made: "Who heard something they'd like to hear more about from a member or discuss further as a group?"

- If there are a number of such inquiries, the group simply picks where to go next and how much time to give each theme.

- Enjoy the discussion, keeping track of the use of time.

Focus Question Updates (10–20 minutes)

- *The following prompt is provided to the entire group to open this part of the discussion:* "How is our focus question impacting our lives? What do you hope may come of living into this question well in the coming weeks and months?"

- Any member who has an update restates their focus question and gives their update, including any of the following:

  - How they have been "living their question"
  - New insights on their focus question
  - Progress, regress, hopes, or issues related to their growth in this area
  - Possibility of modifying the focus question or starting a new one
  - Group discussion with the sharing member(s) as deemed useful

Problem-Solving (0–15 minutes)

- Ask if any members have a "presenting problem" that they'd like to tell the group about or for which they'd like to obtain assistance or feedback.

- Determine how much time to allocate to problem-solving. (This can also be done during check-in to be aware at the start of possible time demands for the meeting.)

- Discuss as helpful to the members.

Community Status Check (10 mins—do every few meetings)

- Discuss how the group is doing: what's working, what's not, what if any changes to make.

Check Out (2–5 minutes)

- Confirm schedule and logistics for the next few meetings. Adjust meeting appointments as needed.

- Each member departs with "As I go today, what I'm taking away is… [ ] and what I'm looking forward to is… [ ]."

TRY STUFF: PART 2—EXERCISES FOR FORMATIVE COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Here we provide a number of exercises that members of formative communities can use individually to complement the core Engage-Reflect-Storytell practice described in this chapter. You may choose to make some of these exercises part of your regular practice or you may use them occasionally to provide value and variety to sustain you in your pursuit of getting more out of your life and your ongoing journey of becoming.

Exercise: Reflection Component of the Engage-Reflect-Storytell Practice (E-R-S)

Engage-Reflect-Storytell as described in this chapter is the baseline practice for formative community members. It's what the individual members regularly journal on as they pay attention to their lives to recognize meaningful moments day-to-day. A wide variety of things might appear in this reflection journal, including:

- Flow moments, including peak flow experiences or simple flow (extended and momentary)
- Put on Your Wonder Glasses observations (or any Wonder experiences)
- Mystery noticings
- Coherency Sightings Log
- Savorings—either the Seventh-Day or the Sudden variety (see below)
- Focus question insights or encounters
- Mindset moments—times when you were able to apply any of the five designer's mindsets in a way that made a difference, or insights about how they work for you:
  - ○ wonder
  - ○ availability
  - ○ radical acceptance
  - ○ fully engaged and calmly detached
  - ○ create your world
  - ○ and especially our favorite twofer: radical acceptance and availability

Exercise: Seventh-Day Savoring

Here's a simple four-step exercise you can do weekly. We recommend making it a regular practice to get the most out of it.

Retreat

- Find a quiet spot where you can sit comfortably for five to ten minutes, either at a table or with a surface you can write on (preferably by hand, but typing is

okay if you prefer).

- Close your eyes and just breathe for a moment. Take at least three or four full, calming breaths to slow yourself down and be glad that you're alive and have this quiet moment to yourself.

Review

- Now, while still keeping your eyes closed, let the last seven days flow before your mind's eye. As you do so, look for two to four moments in your week that you are attracted to and grateful for in retrospect.

- Note: Beware of being "attracted" to problems, conflicts, forgotten to-do items, and the like. The mind loves to get caught up in that stuff. When that stuff appears (and it will), just tell yourself, *I'll get to that another time*, and let it go. Don't fight it or attempt to resolve it—both of which will steal all your attention. Just acknowledge it, then let it go and return to your reflection. And yes, this takes some practice to get the hang of.

- As you review your week, being attentive to those two to four moments, very briefly jot down just one or two words for each such moment that stands out, so you won't lose it. *Cheerful grocer* or *Finished essay* or *Appeased boss*.

Reflect and Savor

- When you've got your list, look it over.

- Fully savor each of those moments again—getting the most out of them. Try to not only *remember* but *reenter* the moment. The idea of savoring is to get more out of the experience by giving it more time and attention than you could when it happened. Savoring is a great form of celebrating the particularity of an experience.

- If one moment particularly pulls your attention, feel free to journal a bit further about the experience. Nothing long or dramatic—just an entry to capture that experience.

Reinforce and Retain

- Then reinforce your reflection by saying to yourself something like, *I'm really glad for these things. With these in mind, it was a good week.*

- This step is putting the *create your world* mindset to work to improve the quality of your experience of your life. That's it! And it really does take only five to ten minutes.

Bonus Step—Insights

- If you notice that any of the moments you identified are offering an insight or a learning you want to capture, write that down, too.

- Insights don't always happen, but they're lovely when they do, so be sure and

get yours when they're available.

Bonus Step—Tell Your Story

- One way of getting the most out of your life is by giving it away—and you don't have to wait for your formative community meeting to do it.

- If others in your household are doing this exercise, too, you can share your reflections.

- Most of us get asked, "How's it going?" pretty often. You could insert a story from your Seventh-Day Reflection in your answer. "It's going pretty well, actually. Why, just last week, the checker at the grocery store ran out to the parking lot to return the credit card I'd dropped. How great is that?"

Exercise: Sudden Savoring

After you've done the Seventh-Day Savoring exercise a number of times and have developed some facility for "savoring," try Sudden Savoring. Sudden Savoring just means doing a quick but deep dive into savoring a moment *right at the time it occurs*. It may seem difficult, but once you get the feel for it, it's surprisingly easy. And it feels great!

Kevin has been a cherished mentor to Dave for decades. Kevin, in his nineties as we wrote this book, was widely appreciated as a very kind and wise person. Many people in addition to Dave would seek Kevin's help, so Kevin spent a lot of time having a coffee with someone struggling with being fired, getting divorced, receiving a cancer diagnosis, or just being terribly confused or discouraged. Somewhere during those many difficult coffee conversations, Kevin would famously pause, look the person in the eyes, and say, "Gosh, I dunno. That sounds like a very tough situation. I'm not sure what to say, but I do have one question. [pause] How's the coffee?" The person would bewilderingly say, "What?!" And Kevin would repeat, "How's the coffee?… The coffee right there in that cup, the one in your hand. How is it?" Kevin would persist until they stopped, slowly took a sip, and actually noticed what the coffee tasted like. And it tasted good—usually far better than they had yet noticed. Kevin was tricking people into a Sudden Savoring, which had two immediate benefits every time. First, it gave them a chance to enjoy their coffee. It created a little moment of joy—a scandalously particular moment—amid a difficult time. Second, it grounded them and brought them back to the flow world of the present moment, where the big problem always seemed less scary.

It's nice when someone named Kevin is there to remind you to savor the moment you're in, but you can remind yourself (and you needn't wait for a crisis to do it). Hint: Sudden Savoring is a technique to create an in-the-moment simple flow experience that's worth remembering. They can be found in all kinds of situations like:

- Over a cup of coffee

- Petting the dog

- Someone letting you go ahead of them in the checkout line
- Smelling the tree as you step out of the car
- Noticing the spotless glass as you pull it out of the dishwasher
- Hugging your mom, partner, child, friend, neighbor, or someone else
- Reading a beautiful sentence in a book

All that you have to do is recognize that you're enjoying something. As soon as you do, tell yourself, *Oh! I love this! Don't miss it!* and immediately stop and close your eyes for two to three seconds—really, that's all it takes—and give your complete attention to that one thing. Let that coffee taste or pine scent or soft fur wash all over and through you for just that brief moment and take a snapshot of it in your body that you can pull out later for further reflection.

That's it! Once you start doing Sudden Savorings, you'll do them all the time.

8

We encourage our students to spend their Odyssey Years exploring the world and deepening their understanding of themselves, their relationships, and what matters most. This time of life is when the young adult is being formed, culminating in the full development of the prefrontal cortex (PFC)—the part of the brain responsible for planning, problem-solving, decision-making, and, most importantly, self-control.

In terms of meaning and purposefulness, emerging adults often desperately want to discover their passion (and you know how we feel about the passion problem). While a few twentysomethings find a passion early, most people remain on that search well into their thirties or forties, which we remind them is totally normal, and even then doesn't guarantee finding that "one true passion." Most people have multiple passions that evolve over the years, and frequently arise only after working in a field long enough to grow enough appreciation for it to become a passion. Passion's great—but don't wait for it.

These are also the years of intensely forming one's convictions. It's not only okay, it's necessary to have strong opinions and to care very deeply about things as an emerging adult. Those strong feelings are the on-ramp to the coherent life—a life organized around living out your values. While those values and concerns will change over time, now's the time for becoming committed to the value-centered, coherent life.

A number of important appetites are grown in this time of life, and most important among them are curiosity, wonder, and coherency. The Odyssey Years are the perfect time to curate your curiosity, which is the doorway to wonder. Allow yourself to dabble in all manner of things and learn to be a learner. Let yourself be easily amazed and make wonder a habit. If you exit your twenties having become an expert at putting on your wonder glasses, that capability will pay huge lifelong dividends in accessing the flow world and meaningful moments.

A warning is that the opposite can also be true—this is a time when skepticism and negative mindsets can take hold. If you enter your thirties with no compass for wayfinding, have lost your curiosity, and have become a stranger to wonder, a harsh road may await you. Powerful systems (like business, government, academia, and medicine) run the transactional world. If you enter that world without your own compass, the system will gladly provide you one of its own making. Following someone else's compass makes you a passenger of your life, not the author of it. If you exit emerging adulthood having lost track of wonder, you may never find your way back to it decades later when you really need it and can finally revel in the fullness of it in the second half of life.

Investing in curiosity, wonder, and coherence during the Odyssey Years will lay a strong foundation on which to build a meaningful life for many decades to come. So lean deeply into curiosity, search out experiences of wonder, and strive to articulate your values and live coherently by them. These are the big tasks of becoming during this season and, if attended to well, will help you get the most out of those years and the years to come.

The First Half

After the Odyssey Years, the rest of the first-half years are full of challenges. It is during

this stage that Richard Rohr talks about building your life container. This is the container that defines who you are and where you stand in the world. Basically, it's what you're all about—the combination of your story, your Workview, and your Lifeview (chapter 5). Crafting that container is hard, necessary work. Much if not most of that work is done in the transactional world as you build your work and career and assemble your network of friends, colleagues, and family. The emphasis is on getting stuff done and making something of your life (however you define that). And it takes time. That transactional emphasis tends to come with a nonstop sense of urgency. It seems like everything takes too long, so we are constantly pushing to speed things up. But a lot is happening in these first-half years with work, career, family, relationships, children, community, and naming your mission and goals for life. These things take a few decades to complete, so pace yourself. Don't let the urgency distract you from the joy of this season. These very productive years can be deeply gratifying and meaningful, if you remember to pay attention and catch the many wonder-full moments when they appear. You'll pass this way but once, so remember to make the most of it.

The encouragement we want to give to those of you in the first half of life is to keep moving and not get lost or stuck. We wrote this book to address a concern that we kept hearing again and again from people in their thirties and forties—that they were working hard, and even successfully, at designing and building their lives, but they still weren't experiencing the kind of meaning and purposefulness in those lives that they were hoping for. As we heard their stories, it sounded to us like they were accidentally (though quite understandably) getting stuck in their first-half-of-life thinking. For modern people in a post-internet, AI-accelerated world, the first-half-of-life project can easily become all-consuming and all transactional. The first half's hyper-focus on producing and achieving has made impact the primary if not sole form of meaning-making many people recognize. Being busy isn't the problem. As we've seen it, losing sight that there is anything else in life is the problem.

There's more at stake here than just the sadness of missing out on the gifts of the flow world during these years. This relentless focus on constant production morphs from a merely lopsided lifestyle trend to an ideological conviction. Serious people living worthwhile lives are *getting stuff done*, and the best and brightest are using technology to *do more faster*. The mantra of *more faster* starts to become a mindset—even a kind of moral code—that perniciously works its way into every domain of modern life. Worst of all, this mindset is insatiable, so it carries its adherents along year after year, well into the second half of life and in so doing delays or even prevents the rest of the journey of becoming fully human. If you're learning the same lessons at sixty that you learned at forty, there's a good chance you overran the finish line of the first half and just kept going. Keeping a more balanced perspective isn't hard to do, but it is easy to forget. That's where some well-chosen practices from this book and participating in a supportive formative community can make a world of difference.

During these go-go years of work and possibly family, just remember to design a life that includes regular access to the flow world, that makes room for wonder, and appreciates coherency along the way. You don't need to dedicate lots of time to these

things—just enough to keep your awakened brain awake and celebrate the scandal of particularity. Many of the exercises in the preceding chapters can be done in no time at all, and you'll find that small investments of time and attention given to the flow world can reap huge psychic benefits. Try it—we guarantee you'll feel the difference in no time.

The second recommendation we have for this first-half stage is to get your compass calibrated and form the habit of living coherently. While the Odyssey Years are the time to start forming your Compass Values, it's in the thick of these first-half years that your compass gets calibrated against the push and pull of reality in adult life. Now is the time when necessity will very likely demand some compromises be made. Perhaps creativity is important to you, but the only job you could find in the media world was account management. Is creatively managing your customer relationships and promoting creative media (but not actually *making it* yourself) good enough, or do you feel you need to find a different job altogether? These aren't easy questions, but they're the ones we face in the first half. When they appear, take them head-on and work it through so that you have confidence in your own coherency. In our work, when someone at the age of thirty-eight or forty-five suddenly looks up and finally admits to themselves they've lost their way, exclaiming, "Omigosh! How did I get *here*?!" it's usually because they abandoned their compass early on—or never calibrated it in the first place. Having a set of values is easy; applying them coherently in the real world can be harder. Don't shy away from the task or put it off to next time. Get your compass calibrated and take coherency sightings regularly, especially in your thirties and forties.

This is also a great time to invest in a formative community and to find mentors to help you navigate the tough choices when they arise. Both of us remain deeply grateful to have had great mentors who helped us stay on track when things got confusing during our early careers and young family years.

The Second Half

The second half of life is about moving from self-actualization into self-transcendence—the peak of Maslow's revised pyramid. This follows the rule, "First we must build the Self, so that we can transcend the Self." Going back decades if not centuries, much has been written about the second half of life, and never more than as the huge baby boomer generation began entering their sixties and seventies (with Gen X and millennials coming up close behind). If you are entering this phase of life, we encourage you to sample the many books, TED Talks, podcasts, workshops, and articles on the subject and discover what resources are most helpful to you. While this is not a comprehensive treatment, we do want to highlight some of the unique gifts and design opportunities to be found in this stage.

When we're talking about the second half of adult life, we're talking about the life that awaits us after a big shift in the human journey of becoming—the shift from role to soul. In Connie Zweig's lovely book *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul*, she describes the special invitation of late life as an opportunity

> to discover an advanced stage of human development that is hidden in plain sight—the shift from role to soul. This phrase was coined by spiritual teacher Ram Dass, a Harvard psychologist who returned from India in the 1960s and became a renowned guide and bestselling author. He describes this shift in identity from the active roles that we have fulfilled during our lives to something deeper, something connected to a spiritual essence that has inherent value and does not depend on our productivity, accomplishments, or self-image. Ram Dass calls this spiritual essence loving awareness. Whether we call it soul, Spirit, Higher Self, or God, when we begin to identify with That, we begin to become who we really are. With this next stage of development, we can unearth the treasures of late life.

Not everyone chooses to make this shift, and while it usually happens in one's fifties, it can start anywhere from thirty-five to eighty-five, depending on the mindset and personality of the individual. The famous psychiatrist and researcher Carl Jung spoke extensively about this change. He called it going from life's "morning" to life's "afternoon."

> Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life. Worse still, we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and our ideals will serve us [as before] going forward. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning, for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true, at evening will have become a lie.

Jung suggests that second-half living is different from the first-half living, so the tools and tricks that worked in life's morning probably won't work as well in the afternoon of life. Remember philosopher James Carse's discussion of finite and infinite games—where we play finite games by the rules to win versus playing with the rules in infinite games to get to keep playing? Using Carse to explain Jung, what we're saying is that the first half of life is playing a finite game (winning the project of building the container of your life) while the second half of life is an infinite game (staying in the never-ending game of enjoying each particular moment for itself). Going from being an effective finite game player to an artful infinite game player is what the big midlife shift is all about. That may sound a bit daunting, but if you think on it for a moment, it's wonderfully encouraging news. Carse and Jung and countless wisdom traditions before them are telling us that the second half of life is a refreshingly new chapter with new gifts to give and new experiences of meaning and purposefulness in store for us. It stands to reason that a new approach is needed to make the most of these new discoveries.

Our first tip: Don't stumble your way into second-half living. (Skip the midlife crisis.) Stumbling into midlife happens when we have become so preoccupied with first-half living that we ignore the signals that the game is changing. Signals like your body is past its natural peak; you're the one at work with more answers than questions; your kids are going through puberty (it's one of life's ironies that we go through a second puberty just as our kids are going through their first); and "winning" or "succeeding" just doesn't pack

the same punch it used to. When these things start appearing in life, don't turn a blind eye and just hit the gas to accelerate into your old life (by going to the clubs more, or buying a new wardrobe, or trading up to a faster car). Lean into this new perspective and listen to what your life is starting to tell you.

The secret to doing midlife well is simple—it's our old designer's mindset friends: acceptance and availability. If we accept that the second half is coming and make ourselves available to it and open to learn from it, we can make the most of it. If we just try to keep doing what we've done before, we'll get stuck in the first half and find it more and more frustrating. If you keep a little curiosity, wonder, coherence, and community going, you'll be well positioned to skip the crisis and sail into your second half.

The chief feature of the well-lived second-half life is freedom. With the container-building project of your first-half self largely completed; you are now free to put your attention on other things. You are still involved in the transactional world and probably very busy, but in this stage, you more and more get to pick what you say yes and no to. If we come to our second-half life with a healthy trust in ourselves and fully accepting the life that we're in—successes, losses, compromises, joys, and all—our capacity to notice and pay attention to our experience of life in the moment (and not just our progress on our goals) takes a big leap forward. That capacity can become a superpower.

Our second tip: Get good at using your flow world–vision superpower. Like Superman's superpower of X-ray vision, second-half people have the superpower of flow-world vision. In chapter 3, we talked about "How to Be in Two Places at Once" and provided suggestions for how to quickly transition from the transactional world to the flow world and back again. This is much easier to do in your second-half life because your maturity and wisdom enhance and focus your vision. You can *see* the flow world much more easily because you have put the transactional world in its place—it isn't taking up all your attention and awareness. Remember that the flow world is always happening everywhere. Every moment has a flow moment available in it. With this superpower, you experience the reality of the flow world coursing along just below the surface of the transactional world, and you are able to access it anytime you want.

Dave's friend Foster is a perfect example of someone in this stage of life. Foster works hard at living in the flow world as much as he can and is able to keep his awareness of and connection to the flow world even while being busy in the transactional world. Foster calls his experience of the flow world "eternity" (i.e., the never-ending now of the present moment). Dave recently asked Foster about how it was going. "Oh, I'm just having a great time being an eternal person these days," said Foster. "I'm enjoying trying to do eternity all the time now."

Foster isn't a monk sitting under a rock in the desert; he's a small-business owner in his fifties, with a wife and four kids in high school and college. He goes to work at his industrial hearing testing company every day and schedules the mobile testing trucks on their routes. He deals with happy customers and upset customers. He makes sure to be available for his kids' after-school sports competitions, and he swings by the grocery store for some eggs on the way home. Foster is a regular guy with a regular life. He just happens to live it almost continuously in the flow world, which is his version of eternity.

Foster uses the designer's mindsets, especially radically accepting his life, so that he is fully engaged and calmly detached from whatever he is doing. He worked hard to build the container of his life in his thirties and forties. He has run his business for twenty-plus years, so he knows what he's doing in his career. He's worked on his marriage and being a dad for a couple of decades and is definitely hitting his stride in his family life. He's done the work of life's first half and, most importantly, accepts the life that he's built—which frees him to live his life much more deeply and meaningfully because he's no longer distracted by having anything to prove.

Now, don't get us wrong. Foster is a pretty advanced second-half kind of guy. Dave considers Foster one of only two or three genuinely enlightened people he's ever known personally, but Foster will tell you it's not really that hard or that complicated. Radically accept your life, look for and see the flow world right in front of you, choose to be available to it, and voilà—you've let your flow world–vision superpower free you to master the art of being in two places at once—the transactional world and the flow world.

Foster is a perfect example of someone who really knows how "to get more out of, not cram more into" his life. This is the single biggest learning and awareness of this stage of life, and one reason that study after study shows that well-adjusted second half of lifers are the happiest people.

Our final second-half-of-life tip: Embrace elderhood. Dedicate yourself to acquiring the wisdom that comes with being an elder. Take full responsibility for maximizing the learnings and growth uniquely available in the latter years of the second half. One good way to engage that opportunity well is to ask big focus questions as you begin this part of life's journey.

As an example, for their fifty-year anniversary retreat, Dave's TD3 formative community developed a set of focus questions that they used to launch their shift to elderhood as they entered their seventies:

- As you enter elderhood, what do you need to let go of (roles, children, powers, etc.)?
- At this stage, how much is enough (money, professional contribution, service, etc.)?
- What in you is most resisting this change, and what in you is most welcoming it?
- What invitation is life extending to you as you become an elder?

On each day of their five-day retreat, one of the guys led the group in a deep discussion of one of these four questions, then on the last day, they all had to answer, "Now, what are you actually going to do? What will you prototype as you shift into your elderhood well, and how can we support you as you do it?"

Bill's men's group (all of whose kids have long ago grown and gone) is asking similar questions, and so are the hundreds of DCI fellows that Dave has worked with over the years. This kind of deep conversation can make a huge impact on everyone, and choosing the right questions to focus on can make a tremendous difference. Great questions lead to transformative answers.

All of which leads us back to this chapter's original question. Yes, the stages of life matter for all the reasons listed, but living a meaningful life can happen at all ages and

stages.

Parenting and Partnering

While parenting and partnering aren't "life stages," per se, they are very important parts of life for many people. We're not experts in these fields, but after interacting with hundreds of couples in our life design work over two decades (not to mention having over two dozen kids and grandkids between us), we do have a few suggestions about how to apply the tools and ideas of this book in these important relationships.

For parents, our top recommendation is to focus on helping your kids enjoy and savor childhood, not try to speed them into adulthood. Put another way, avoid the Transactional World Trickle-Down Effect. Parents of young children are themselves right in the middle of the first half of life and busily—very busily—working hard to successfully navigate the many demands of the transactional world. They want to compete effectively and win as many of the finite games life has them playing as possible. It's only natural for them to direct their kids' lives the same way they're directing their own. While quite understandable, it's not helpful. That tendency has produced the most performance-oriented and success-driven children in the history of mankind, and it's been a disaster for childhood. Children are naturally at home in the flow world. They thrive in the present moment and are at ease with wonder. The essential activity of the flow world is play, and children are terrific at play (the flow world is just one big infinite game). If we put children in the right environment and let them do what comes naturally, the simple flow of childhood happens.

In his highly acclaimed book *The Anxious Generation*, NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt makes the important distinction between a screen-based childhood, a recent invention with myriad negative effects, and a play-based childhood, which enables healthy individual and social growth and well-being. It's a stunning conclusion that the centerpiece of Haidt's corrective for what ails modern childhood is the absence of *play*. We couldn't agree more. Play puts a child in the flow world. The flow world evokes much of what makes us human, so play is a parent's best friend. Resist the Transactional World Trickle-Down Effect that, left unchecked, pushes every aspect of every person's life—at any and every age—toward more and more production.

Defend your child's right to be a child. Defend your child's right to be in the flow world.

And don't just transport your kids to the flow world and back; go with them. There's a huge difference between just *visiting* your child's world and *entering* into it with them. It's easy to let the transactional world try to edge its way in, but playing *with* your kids is way more fun for both of you and far more formative for the child. What's not to like about that?! And if you take this approach, your child won't be the only beneficiary. You'll receive a lovely and unexpected gift from your child—the Children's Flow World Trickle-Up Effect. Having lots of flow-world experiences with your children isn't just good for them; it's good for you, too, as it enhances your own capacity for participating in the flow world. There's no experience of parenting quite as sweet as letting your child

grow you into a better person. In healthy families, we're all part of one another's becoming.

For couples, whether partnership or marriage, our suggestion is simply that you strive to make your relationship a formative community. This may seem so obvious as not to be worthy of mention, but it won't happen on its own, and as it's an incredibly powerful strategy, it warrants some attention. There are lots of popular myths and memes about love. We'll point out two in particular that stand in stark contrast to formative community. The first archetype, which has fueled countless love songs, sings a familiar refrain, "I love you just the way you are, darling. Please... don't ever change!" This romantic sentiment is entirely understandable. When your epic quest for love has finally found your heart's desire and you've fallen madly in love, of course you want that magic moment to last forever!

The second example is its opposite—where one person is not in love with who the other person *is* but loves who they *could become* if only a few critical changes take place. Life will be wonderful just as soon as he starts reading better books and has something interesting to say to my clever friends, or as soon as she plays better tennis and learns to love camping. And so begins the (invariably doomed) relationship-long project to fix or improve the lacking partner.

These two classic love memes may be clichés, but that fact hasn't stemmed their popularity. Both these misperceptions make the same mistake. They take a static, frozen-in-time view of the other person, whether in the present or the future, that denies and eventually competes and conflicts with that person's ongoing becoming. While most real-life couples' relationships are much better than either of these caricatures, the flaw in these clichés points out a critical aspect of healthy love—the importance of fully embracing growth and becoming. Many couples have a solid social relationship in which they quite enjoy each other's company, and a collaborative relationship in which they help one another in building a life and family, but too seldom do couples truly attain a formative relationship committed to one another's becoming.

Growing a genuinely formative relationship goes beyond simply accepting that things will change over time and dealing with those changes as they appear. A formative partnership does not merely *accept* change; it *expects* change and even catalyzes it. Formative love is grounded first and foremost not in my view and hopes of you or in your view and hopes of me, but in our view and hopes of Us. A formative love trusts that the love that arises between two people actually forms a new thing—an Us. This Us is love's gift and emerges authentically from the best of each person.

The invitation to a formative couple is to nurture the becoming of each individual wholeheartedly and without reservation and in so doing nurture the becoming of Us. This may sound a bit elusive, but we suspect you've seen what we're talking about. We've all been in the presence of couples who, when they're together, create a space, an atmosphere, that is inviting, open, and loving. A space that the couple is at home within and where you feel welcomed as well. That's the kind of Us we're talking about. And while growing such a relationship is clearly a lifelong aspiration, we think it's more accessible than most couples realize.

The way of building a formative couple partnership or marriage follows the exact same process and tools as we outlined for a formative community in the last chapter. It depends on each person committing to their own ongoing becoming by paying attention to their lives and actively living into focus questions that keep them moving and maturing. It includes regularly communicating with one another what we're learning, what we're wondering about, and how we're growing. It doesn't take a lot of time. It does take a mindset committed to one's partner's growth and becoming and a discipline of personal reflection and communication. We're confident that developing the habit of sustaining a formative community conversation as a couple will reap deep benefits in supporting the growth and becoming of your Us.

TRY STUFF: TOOL TIPS FOR DIFFERENT STAGES

This chapter provides insights on how the ideas and tools from the book apply in different stages of life. We aren't adding any new tools here, but we do have tips for where select tools provided in the prior chapters apply at different stages of life. Here is a checklist of tips:

- Your Compass (chapter 5)
  - ○ Developing your compass, especially articulating your Compass Values list, is important during the Odyssey Years to establish the habit of coherency.
- Compass Calibration (chapter 5)
  - ○ During the first half of life, regularly recalibrate your compass, especially as life's demands and obligations require renegotiating compromises.
  - ○ Sharing how your compasses are evolving is a good way for couples to engage in formative community conversations that grow the foundation of their Us.
- Put on Your Wonder Glasses and Museum Magic: Curating Your Curiosity (chapter 4)
  - ○ Doing these exercises in the Odyssey Years can help preserve the vibrancy of your curiosity and availability to wonder as you transition from childhood into adulthood where the transactional world may try to dull these sensibilities.
  - ○ In the second half of life, these exercises can become particularly life-giving with your broadened perspective on the world (and more time to enjoy them).
- Coherency Sightings Log (chapter 5)
  - ○ This is an important practice in your first half, to help keep you focused on living an authentic life and experiencing the joy of your (many!) coherent

moments.

- Flip the World Switch (chapter 3)
  - Use this technique regularly in the first half as a way of ensuring your availability to the flow world, despite being immersed in the transactional world constantly.
  - In the second half of life, strive to be able to access this maneuver at almost any time. Work to see how long you can sustain being flipped into the flow world while still maintaining your activity in the transactional world (e.g., during a meeting with your tax accountant or while washing the car) as a way of learning to be in two worlds at the same time as much as possible.
  - This trick is a great way to quickly enter into the present moment with your child.

- *Got To–Get To* Reversal (chapter 2) and Sudden Savoring (chapter 7)
  - These two quick and readily accessible tools are a good way for parents to transform many of the seeming chore-like requirements of parenthood into life-giving moments (e.g., I *get to* push my child on this swing).
  - They're also both great tools in the first half of life for quick flow-world moment-making to refresh you during a long transactionally demanding day.

- Take a Sniffari (chapter 6)
  - Parents—don't miss this terrific family-outing activity!
  - Second half of lifers—this makes a great exercise for those more regular long walks you've finally got the time for.

- Focus Question (chapter 7)
  - Supporting one another's thoughtfully discerned focus question is a powerful support to a couple wanting to build a formative community.

- Engage-Reflect-Storytell Practice, E-R-S (chapter 7)
  - This practice is highly recommended lifelong. It's our essential response to Socrates's wise counsel to live the examined life—a key aspect of "getting more out of life without having to cram more into it."

CONCLUSION

particularities like a birthday cake, a kind letter, or a well-timed kiss? Well... here's one last example of it.

Your life.

Your life is a particularity—one small, specific instantiation of a much larger and more mystical reality called You. There is no such thing as completely doing You. That's why Maslow's first idea that self-actualization, defined as being all you can be as the apex of human development, was wrong. By radically accepting the limitations of our finite lives, including the relentless and necessary demands put on us by the transactional world we can't live without, we are freed to enjoy what is right in front of us—to get more out of life without compulsively having to keep cramming more and more and more into life.

We know you want to make an impact, to make things better. Better for your family, your community, for yourself and your coworkers, for the climate and the planet, and for all of us. We encourage you to keep working hard at making things better. We hope you are successful, but regardless of how well or how fast or how successful you are at making things better—our most fervent hope for you is that you know more meaning and joy now, right where you are.

Which brings us right back to where we started—the perennial problem of meaning and purpose. In chapter 1, we told you we are not in the business of trying to resolve what *the* meaning *of* life is, nor can we tell you how to find your *one* true purpose. We said that this is a design book by two designers, and those aren't design questions—they're existential, philosophical questions. That's all true, and we stand by that position.

But it's not the whole story.

The real problem with those questions isn't that they're too hard; it's that they define life as a transaction (i.e., they're the wrong question). They treat *the* meaning and purpose *of* life as solvable problems that deserve to be answered once and for all, and that's not what either of us (or most wisdom tradition leaders or the Harvard Study of Adult Development or probably your grandmother) believe. Life is not a transaction that we can win. There is no finish line. Life is simply the continual flow of particular experiences and engagements in which we participate. We really do believe that every one of us holds the possibility of continual change and lifelong growth—we are all a *becoming*. That means that your future self will know things and value things and see things in ways your present self can't even imagine. So how could there ever be a final answer to the ultimate meaning or purpose of your life if there is no final YOU? There is no ultimate real you. There is only the ever-increasingly *revealed* you.

Live right now as meaningfully as you can by accepting reality and being available to wonder and flow and being as coherent as you can by living purposefully day by day with the support and encouragement of a formative community. It not only makes life more enjoyable—it moves you along the way toward your better self, the one capable of even more meaning and purpose. We both have come to believe that meaning is indeed found in engaging in the journey of becoming, and purpose is fulfilled in becoming fully alive in each unfolding moment. The meaning and purpose we all share, but each express uniquely, is to become fully human—deeply engaged in doing worthwhile things in the transactional world and deeply participating in the fullness of the flow world.

If you add up all the ideas and mindsets and tools that we've given you in this book and assemble them into a life practice, what you have is what philosophers call *a way*—a course or mode of living life. We almost titled this book *The Designer's Way* but chose not to because that sounds like we're telling you that our way is the right way and ought to be your way. And that's wrong. What carries you forward in this never-ending person-making project is *your way*, and the point of this book is to get you to design *your own way*. The *Hagakure*, an early 1700s book of samurai wisdom, has this to say about "ways":

> It is bad when one thing becomes two. One should not look for anything else in the Way of the Samurai. It is the same for anything that is called a Way.
>
> Therefore, it is inconsistent to hear something of the Way of Confucius or the Way of the Buddha, and say that this is the Way of the Samurai.
>
> If one understands things in this manner, he should be able to hear about all Ways and be more and more in accord with his own.

We share this to make clear that we are not recommending that you live by the way of design or the way of Bill or the way of Dave. Each of us must find our way. We can learn from others and even participate in an established way, like Buddhism or Christianity or samurai Bushido, but ultimately, we each must choose our way and make our way through life by it.

So now begins the real work—that of making your way. Happily, there's no deadline, and you're not late (there is no time called *late* in the flow world; there is only the time called *now*). All you need to do is start. Pick a few things you've learned here that work or are attractive and start doing them regularly—as a practice. Mix it up over time and see how it goes—prototype and experiment. Add things from other sources and other aspects of life we've not addressed (of which there are many, like art, or music, or philosophy, or spirituality, or learning, or, or, or...). Pull some like-minded souls into the project with you and enjoy the special joy of a formative community.

Above all... *live a meaningful life starting today*. It's sitting right in front of you, waiting to be recognized, engaged, and savored. You deserve it. We all do.

So, start designing *your* way.

Our Way

So how do we even get along, much less work side by side cocreating life design tools and curriculum for eighteen years? Don't we slam into the theist-atheist divide all the time? Do the same design ideas and tools really work for both of us? The short answers to those three questions are: Beautifully. No. And yes, absolutely. Let us briefly explain.

Yes, on the surface, we believe very different things, but we got to those two very different convictions (atheism and theism) from exactly the same place—pondering mystery. Years ago, late one night in an Indian restaurant in East London, Dave and Bill were once again deep in conversation about their lives and their beliefs. As they were

being shooed out so the restaurant could close, Dave announced, "Bill! The only real difference between us is that when I encounter mystery, I round up to God, and when you encounter mystery, you round down to 'science, and I just don't know.' That's all there is to it. Sure—we define the source of mystery differently, but more importantly, we share the same regard and wonder for it. And that's what really matters."

It is that shared regard for mystery and wonder that is the common spiritual/philosophical foundation for our work. And while our philosophies about mystery and God differ (a little), our view of the human condition (our anthropology) is completely aligned. *Design thinking*, the rebranded name of human-centered design, is our common "creed." We agree on the goal of design thinking—to enable as many people as possible to become more fully human and experience more aliveness. Bill is an avowed humanist, and Dave's favorite scriptural label for Jesus is "the second Adam" (i.e., a fully human person). We both agree that "if we get the human part right, we can't go wrong," and that alignment has directed all our work together. That's why we're so grateful to be able to write a book with the explicit goal of helping people become more fully alive and fully human by living more meaningful, purposeful lives.

Your Way

So, here you are.

The truth is, there is no ultimate hack, no final breakthrough, no secret meaning map hiding in a drawer somewhere. What you have—what you've always had—is this moment. And then the next one. And the next. If you're looking for a meaningful life, don't scan the horizon. Look down. Right here is where it starts. Because a meaningful life isn't found. It's designed. Moment by moment. With whatever raw material you have at hand.

How you live a meaningful life is in the granular now. It's in how you greet your barista, how you pause before a sunset, how you show up to the hard conversation. It lives in the texture and precision of your attention. Meaning is not the mountain. It's the steps. It's not the symphony. It's each note, well played. It's not the painting; it's the tiny point of color on the brush only you hold.

A meaningful life isn't something you earn by solving for significance. It's something you create by designing for depth. By stepping into the flow that is everywhere, all at once, all the time.

So don't wait. Don't overthink. Don't aim for perfect or for tomorrow.

Try stuff. Tell your story. Start where you are.

And here's the final invitation: Keep designing. Not because something's wrong with your life but because you are alive—and to be alive is to be in motion. Meaning is a dynamic experience, a pattern of presence. It grows with you. Changes with you. Fails and flourishes with you. It's not out there waiting—it's in here, unfolding.

Every moment of your one, precious life is a design opportunity.

Design it well.

Acknowledgments

Writing a book about living a meaningful life demands, first and foremost, a life filled with meaningful people. We have been fortunate to be surrounded by generous, creative, and steadfast collaborators—each of whom has helped us find clarity, purpose, and voice in this work.

Lara Love, our agent, cowriter, and muse, has been with us from the start. She is nothing short of a creative force. Lara helps keep us honest, helps keep us inspired, and—let's be real—helps keep us on schedule. She makes us sound more coherent than we sometimes are and more insightful than we sometimes feel. We are grateful for her steady hand and open heart. This book doesn't happen without her.

Stephanie Hitchcock, our beloved editor at Simon & Schuster, brings wisdom, professionalism, and a deep understanding of our message. She really got it right from the start, and dependably advocated for the reader at every turn. Her insight shaped this book into its best version.

Kathy Davies and Susan Burnett—our closest partners for more than a decade—have masterfully and reliably built a team of trainers and delivered our work to thousands of people we could never reach on our own. Their dedication has inspired us to keep the movement moving.

Kristin Jensen, our reliable workshop project manager and general-purpose conscience, has kept us on track and made sure everything works and runs on time. Her cheerful, dependable responsiveness is the magic behind our global coach network.

We offer our enduring thanks to Doug Abrams of Idea Architects—our first literary agent, our champion from the start, and the person who saw the potential in a couple of designers with a hunch about life. Doug was the one who figured out how to shape *Designing Your Life* into a book that could resonate beyond the classroom and reach a global audience.

To all our Stanford Life Design Lab Fellows over the years, and to our community of trained educators who have expanded our work far beyond what we could have imagined—thank you for supporting students everywhere in designing and living meaningful lives.

We are grateful to our nearly one thousand certified coaches worldwide, who keep us close to what's on people's hearts through their artful care and priceless feedback.

Dave gives his unfading appreciation to his late wife, Claudia, who taught him most of what he knows about moment-making, and his grateful wonder to Frish for her astonishing willingness to risk falling in love with him. Thank you, my dear Frish, for opening my eyes to what becoming can become as we discover Us.

Bill would like to especially acknowledge his wonderful wife, Cynthia, who has stood

by him through every iteration of this journey. Her love, patience, and perspective have been sources of strength, grounding, and inspiration. Thank you, Cynthia, for making this life, and this work, more meaningful than words can capture.

And finally, to our readers—whether you're joining us for the first time or continuing the conversation from earlier books—thank you for taking the journey. This book was written for you, and made possible by the village of remarkable people behind it.

With gratitude,
Bill and Dave

About the Authors

© JIMMY RUGGIERO

Bill Burnett is the executive director of the Life Design Lab at Stanford University and an adjunct professor in mechanical engineering and design at Stanford. He is also the founder and managing director of the Designing Your Life Institute in Singapore.

Dave Evans is the cofounder of the Life Design Lab at Stanford University, an adjunct lecturer at the Stanford School of Engineering, and cofounder of Electronic Arts.

FOR MORE ON THESE AUTHORS:
SimonandSchuster.com/Authors/Bill-Burnett
SimonandSchuster.com/Authors/Dave-Evans

SimonandSchuster.com

@_simonelement

Follow us on TikTok@simonelementbooks

We hope you enjoyed reading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

Endnotes

1: Meaning and Purpose Reframed

And the research says that chasing "more": Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell, "Hedonic Relativism and Planning the Good Society," in *Adaptation-Level Theory*, ed. Michael H. Appley (Academic Press, 1971), 287–305.

Most of the time, what gets people stuck: Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (International Universities Press, 1976), 37.

[Self-actualization] refers to the desire to become more and more what one is: Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–96.

Walt Whitman said: Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," sec. 51, in *Leaves of Grass* (public domain).

In his diaries that were unpublished: Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006): 302–17.

The concept of particularity*:* Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Martin Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (A. Deichert, 1892).

2: Think Like a Designer

We outlined five design mindsets in our first book: Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 15.

Now these folks aren't actually luckier than you: Richard Wiseman, *The Luck Factor: The Scientific Study of the Lucky Mind* (Miramax Books, 2003).

Professor Howard "invented" the field of decision analysis: "Ronald A. Howard," Wikipedia, last modified May 30, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_A._Howard.

Let's say that we are all attending: Burnett and Evans, *Designing Your Life*, 227.

Extensive research: Gregory M. Walton, David S. Yeager, and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "Teaching a Lay Theory Before College Narrows Achievement Gaps at Scale," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 24 (2016): 6,575–80; and Nicole M. Stephens, MarYam G. Hamedani, and Mesmin Destin, "Closing the Social Class Achievement Gap: A Difference Education Intervention Improves First Generation Students' Academic Performance and All Students' College Transition," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 4 (2014): 943–53.

Bill learned this from his mentor at Stanford: Bernard Roth, *The Achievement Habit: Stop Wishing, Start Doing, and Take Command of Your Life* (Harper Business, 2015).

3: A Tale of Two Worlds

Flow was first formally defined: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990).

In his 1990 classic: Ibid., 215.

As Joseph Campbell famously said: Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, episode 2, dir. Alvin H. Perlmutter (PBS, 1988).

We probably like: James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (Free Press, 1986); and Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (Portfolio, 2019).

In fact, Dave has had this poem: Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (Macmillan, 1901), chap. 8 epigraph.

4: The Wonder Formula

According to the psychologist Edward Deci: Richard M. Ryan, ed., *The Emerging Neuroscience of Intrinsic Motivation: A New Frontier in Self-Determination Research* (Springer, 2020).

Supermassive black holes: Chris Ferrie, "Quantum Entanglement Isn't All That Spooky After All: The Way We Teach Quantum Theory Conveys a Spookiness That Isn't Actually There," *Scientific American*, February 13, 2023.

In a 2023 Pew Research Center survey study: "Spirituality Among Americans," Pew Research Center December 7, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/.

Recent neuroscience research highlights: Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Make You Healthier, Happier, and More Connected* (Penguin Press, 2023); Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," *Cognition & Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): 297–342; and Michelle N. Shiota, Dacher Keltner, and Barbara Campos, "Awe, Wonder, and Other Positive Emotions: Awe's Effects on Cognition, the Self, and Prosocial Behavior," in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Emotions*, 209–28 (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Studies using fMRI show: Michiel van Elk et al., "The Neural Correlates of the Awe Experience: Reduced Default Mode Network Activity during Feelings of Awe," *Human Brain Mapping* 40, no. 17 (2019): 5,616–28.

In that same Pew Research study: "Spirituality Among Americans," Pew Research Center.

Robert Irwin: Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Things One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (University of California Press, 1982).

Neuroscience has long known: Mark P. Mattson, "Superior Pattern Processing Is the Essence of the Evolved Human Brain," *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 8 (2014): 265.

The painter Robert Henri in his book The Art Spirit*:* Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

"I have a theory that the moment": Henry Miller, *Black Spring* (Grove Press, 1963).

5: Living the Coherent Life

Parker Palmer: Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

6: Finding Flow

Neuroscience research: Jude S. Gold and Joseph Ciorciari, "A Review on the Role of the Neuroscience of Flow States in the Modern World," *Behavioral Sciences* 10, no. 9 (2020): 137.

It turns out that you don't need words to think: Ferris Jabr, "You Don't Need Words to Think," *Scientific American*, October 17, 2024.

Current understanding recognizes: Gold and Ciorciari, "A Review," 8.

The diagram below shows the flow channel: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990), 74.

In his updated model: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 1997), 31.

The conventional model of flow we've been discussing so far: We acknowledge that in the formal work of Csikszentmihalyi and other well-regarded flow researchers, the concept of a range of flow

experience intensities is recognized. In *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, the near-flow states of Relaxation, Control, and Arousal, as shown in the second diagram in this chapter, are associated with positive experiences found on the way to achieving flow. However, having taught about and advocated for flow with our students and clients for three decades, it has been our overwhelming experience that the large majority of people continue to define flow singularly as an intense if not extreme state available only at a very high level of challenge (i.e., they restrict flow to the small upper right "flow corner" of this diagram). Consequently, they find flow elusive and rare, often so much so that they abandon the pursuit of flow entirely. It is in response to this popular understanding of flow—rather than an academic orientation—that we're offering the reframe of the expanded flow channel and the concept of simple flow accessed via the designer's mindsets of radical acceptance and availability; Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*; Christine Norsworthy et al., "Advancing Our Understanding of Psychological Flow: A Scoping Review of Conceptualizations, Measurements, and Applications," *Psychological Bulletin* 147, no. 8 (2021): 806–27; and Sylvia Karasu, "Flow: In a Zone of Total Focus—There Are Intrinsic Rewards in an Experience," *Psychology Today* (blog), February 18, 2025.

Another case: Julia Brailavskaia et al., "'I Like It' and 'I Need It': Relationship between Implicit Associations, Flow, and Addictive Social Media Use," *Computers in Human Behavior* 113 (2020): 106,512.

The massive influence of social media: Dan-Catalin Oprea et al., "Behavioural Addictions and the Role of Dopamine," *Bulletin of Integrative Psychiatry* 27, no. 4 (2021).

In her book: Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (Dutton, 2021).

"Video games are one of the best ways to get into flow": Jessica Wheelock, "Can't Stop Worrying? Why Video Games Help," University of California, March 21, 2024, https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/cant-stop-worrying-why-video-games-help.

Others disagree: Laurent Gros et al., "Video Game Addiction and Emotional States: Possible Confusion Between Pleasure and Happiness?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 2,894.

Canine behavior specialists suggest: David Olby et al., "The Sniff Walk: A Novel Intervention for Reducing Boredom Behaviors in Dogs," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 205 (August 2017): 82–89.

Dogs are olfactory animals: Cécile Duranton and Alexandra Horowitz, "Let's Play Together! A Study of Domestic Dogs' Play Vocalizations," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 217 (August 2019): 56–64.

8: Ages and Stages

We affirm the widely held perspective: David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (Random House, 2019); and Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

The first half of life is spent finding your place in the world: Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 1.

With this next stage of development: Connie Zweig, *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul* (Inner Traditions, 2021), 5.

But we cannot live the afternoon of life: Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), 111.

This is the single biggest learning and awareness of this stage of life: World Happiness Report 2024, chap. 1, "Happiness and Age," http://doi.org/10.18724/whr-kk3m-b586; and Susan Livingstone, "Age and Emotion Regulation in Daily Life: Frequency, Strategies, Tactics, and Effectiveness," *Psychology and Aging* 29, no. 4 (2014): 819–32.

In his highly acclaimed book: Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).

Index

A note about the index: The pages referenced in this index refer to the page numbers in the print edition. Clicking on a page number will take you to the ebook location that corresponds to the beginning of that page in the print edition. For a comprehensive list of locations of any word or phrase, use your reading system's search function.

Note: Page references in *italics* refer to figures.

acceptance, endorsement versus, 48, 96

achieving brain and awakened brain, 80–82, *81*

action

- active participation, 51
- generative action, 55

"afternoon of life," 193–94

age and stage of life. *See* life stages

airplane example, 47–48

Alain (case study), 174

Allan (case study), 22

Allison (case study), 1–3, 18

amygdala, 137

Annalise (case study), 45

Anxious Generation, The (Haidt), 198

apathy, 141

Apple, 20, 36

Arne (case study), 55–57

Art Spirit, The (Henri), 101

"as it is world," flow world as, 84

athletes and sports examples

- "being in the zone," 69, 135 (*see also* flow state)

peak impact at early age, 20

Atlas problem example, 7, 14

attention economy, 98. *See also* engagement

availability mindset

availability and wonder twofer, 56–57

defined, 44–46

radical acceptance and availability mindsets, 140–43, *142*, *143*

radical acceptance and availability twofer, 54–56

Awakened Brain, The (Miller), 80–82

awareness, raising. *See* coherency

awe, wonder and, 96–98

Baden (case study), 172–73, 176

baseball example, 51–52

becoming

becoming more fully human, 9 (*see also* humanness)

Be-Do-Become cycle, 57–59, *58*, 165–66

Designer's Way as journey of becoming, 57–59

purpose and passion for, 15–18

self-actualization as, 23, 25 (*see also* self-actualization)

Beethoven symphony example, 29

"Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water" (Zen proverb), 149

"being in the zone," 69, 135. *See also* flow state

boredom, 141

Box, George E. P., 67

brain and cognition

achieving and awakened brain, 80–82, *81*

amygdala, 137

dopamine, 151–52

flow state and implicit/explicit functions of, 136–37

fMRI studies of awe, 97–98

patterns recognized by, 100

prefrontal cortex, 137, 188

Brooks, David, 176

Build Your Compass exercise, 132, 200–201

Burnett, Bill

art of, 139

Designing Your Life, 1–2, 93–94

Designing Your Life class (Stanford University), 36, 188 (*see also* Stanford University)

design thinking as creed of, 207–8

formative community of, 176–77, 197

How to Live a Meaningful Life, 10–12

"office hours for life" for students of, 3

personal life of, 9

professional background of, 36

cake/cupcake example, 28

Campbell, Joseph, 70, 135

cancer example, 48

Carse, James, 77, 193–94

case studies

Alain, 174

Allan, 22

Allison, 1–3, 18

Annalise, 45

Arne, 55–57

Baden, 172–73, 176

Derek, 111, 114, 118

Foster, 195–96

Fritz, 74–76, 144–45

George, 6, 8

Greg, 169–70

Harmony, 166–71

Lawrence, 94–95

Lena, 115–16, 120, 122, 125–27

Mattea, 5–6, 8

Pax, 175

Reg, 111, 113–14, 118

Rona, 174–75

Sonya, 3–5, 18

Steena, 112, 114, 118

change, designing meaning for, 12. *See also* life stages

change, inevitability of, 9

Chevron Oil Corporation, 19

children, parenting, 197–98

Children's Flow World Trickle-Up Effect, 198

Choose Life exercise, 59–61

Christianity, state of grace concept, 102

cognition. *See* brain and cognition

coherency, 11, 12, 111–33

coherency sightings for, 128–32, 201

coherent life, constraints on, 113–14

coherent life and values alignment, 112–13

coherent life examples, 111–12

compass, recalibrating, 127, 201

compass building for, 115–23

compass for, 113, *113*

compass values, identifying, 123–27

in first half of life, 191

Try Stuff exercises for, 132–33, 201

communities, formative. *See* formative communities

compass. *See also* coherency

building, 115–23

Build Your Compass exercise, 132, 200–201
coherency sightings for, 128–32, 201
defined, 113, *113*
designing formative communities with, 173–74, 179
forming convictions during Odyssey Years, 188–89
importance of, 189
recalibrating, 127, 201
values, identifying, 123–27
compassion, self-transcendence as, 25–26, *26*
constraints
expectations for, 113–14
Lyme disease example, 115–16
trade-offs and compromises for, 118–19
container for life, Rohr on, 187, 189, 193–95
control, 141
conventional flow model problem, *137*, 137–40, *140*
conversation, reflective, 173–74
crafted moments, 38
create your world mindset
defined, 52–54
design thinking importance of, 59–60, 119, 165, 183, 184
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 69, 135, 137, 140. *See also* flow state
curiosity
Curiosity + Mystery = Wonder (Wonder Formula), 44, 96
during Odyssey Years, 188–89
wonder and, 93, 99

Dass, Ram, 192–93
Deci, Edward, 93
decision analysis, 50–52
Derek (case study), 111, 114, 118

Designer's Way, defined, 40–41, 57. *See also* design thinking

Designing Your Life (Burnett and Evans)

core message of, 1–2

on curiosity, 93–94

Designing Your Life class (Stanford University), 36, 188

design thinking, 11, 35–66

as authors' creed, 207–8

availability and wonder twofer for, 56–57

availability mindset and, 44–46

Be-Do-Become cycle and, 57–59, *58*, 165–66

coherency sightings as tool of, 131

create your world as mindset of, 59–60, 119, 165, 183, 184

create your world mindset and, 52–54

defined, 35

Designer's Way for, overview, 40–41, 57

designing formative communities, 177–81 (*see also* formative communities)

for finding meaning, 10–12

fully engaged and calmly detached mindset and, 50–52

meaning design, 36–38

for moment-making, 37

for problem-finding, 13, 26–27 (*see also* meaning and purpose reframed)

prototype importance to, 39–40

prototype iteration for, 35–36

radical acceptance and availability twofer for, 54–56

radical acceptance mindset and, 47–49

real-ization and design, 37–39

Try Stuff exercises for, 59–65

wonder mindset and, 41–44

detachment, outcome and, 51

discontent, meaning and, 1–3, 72

discovered moments, 38–39

Distinguished Careers Institute (Stanford University), 161–63, 172–75

Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence (Lembke), 151–52

dysfunctional beliefs, 18–19, 24–26

Einstein, Albert, 95

elderhood, embracing, 196–97. *See also* life stages

emerging adulthood (Odyssey Years), 188–89

endorsement, acceptance versus, 48, 96

engagement

- active participation and, 51
- attention economy, 98
- awareness of life stages, 187 (*see also* life stages)
- flow state and, 138
- fully engaged and calmly detached mindset for design thinking, 50–52

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S)

- exercise, 182–83
- practice of, 163–66, *164*, 180, 202

Evans, Dave

- *Designing Your Life*, 1–2, 93–94
- Designing Your Life class (Stanford University), 36, 188 (*see also* Stanford University)
- design thinking as creed of, 207–8
- formative community of, 177, 196–97
- *How to Live a Meaningful Life*, 10–12
- "office hours for life" for students of, 3
- particularity experienced by, 29
- personal life of, 9, 48
- professional background of, 19, 36, 77–79

evening gratitude practice, 87

exercises. *See* Try Stuff exercises

explicit functions of brain, 136–37

extended flow, 144–50

Falling Upward (Rohr), 187

family relationships, parenting and partnering, 197–200

fight, flight, or freeze response, 137

Finding Flow: The Psychology of Everyday Life (Csikszentmihalyi), 137

Finite and Infinite Games (Carse), 77

finite games, 77–79, 193–94

first-generation students, success of, 53

first half of life. *See also* life stages

- challenges of, 189–92
- Odyssey Years of, 188–89

Flip the World Switch exercise, 90, 201–2

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (Csikszentmihalyi), 69, 137

flow state, 11, 12, 135–59

- brain's implicit and explicit functions for, 136–37
- conventional flow model problem, *137*, 137–40, *140*
- defined, 68–70, 73, 135
- elusive nature of, 135–36
- intention as action, 54
- mindfulness and, 150–51
- peak flow, 138, 139, *143*, 143–45, 149
- radical acceptance and availability mindsets for, 140–43, *142*, *143*
- simple flow as in-the-moment and extended, 144–50
- social media and, 151–52
- Try Stuff exercises for, 152–59
- video gaming and, 152

Flow Walking Meditation, 154–55

flow world and transactional world, 67–91. *See also* formative communities

- achieving brain and awakened brain for, 80–82, *81*
- engaging with both worlds, 82–87, 89
- finite games and infinite games for, 77–79, 193–94
- flow state needed for flow world, 68–70, 73, 135 (*see also* flow state)

flow world, defined, 67, 70–72

flow world and focus questions, 166–71, 173–76, 179–81, 202

flow world and interconnectedness, 72–73

flow world for transcendency, 72

perspective and experience of each world, 73–77, *77*

practice-to-production trap warning about, 87–88, 190–91

reframing of both worlds, 67, 79–80

transactional world, defined, 68, 71

transactional world and coherency, 128–32

Try Stuff exercise, 89–90

focus questions, 166–71, 173–76, 179–81, 202

formative communities, 11, 12, 161–86

defined, 161

designing formative communities, Try Stuff (part 1) for, 177–81

Distinguished Careers Institute (Stanford) example, 161–63, 172–75

duration of, 176–77

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) practice of, 163–66, *164*, 180, 202

exercises for formative communities, Try Stuff (part 2) for, 182–86

focus questions for, 166–71, 173–76, 179–81, 202

focus questions versus presenting problems as double agenda of, 167, 169–73, 181

harmonic resonance in, 175–76

investing in during first half of life, 191

partnerships or marriages as, 198–200

transactions versus, 162–63

Foster (case study), 195–96

Frankl, Viktor, 14

freedom, life stages and, 194

Fritz (case study), 74–76, 144–45

fulfillment

defined, 21–22

meaning and purpose reframed and, 18–19, 21–26, *23*, *26*

reframing, 25

fully alive mindset, for being present, 25, 49

fully engaged and calmly detached mindset, 50–52

games, finite and infinite, 77–79, 193–94

garden example, 98–100

George (case study), 6, 8

God. *See* spirituality

Google Glass, 13

The Got To–Get To Reversal exercise, 61, 202

gratitude lists, coherency sightings versus, 128

Greg (case study), 169–70

habit, mindset as, 40–41

Hagakure (book of samurai wisdom), 206

Haidt, Jonathan, 198

happiness, meaning *in* life versus meaning *of* life, 14–15, 205. *See also* meaning and meaning-making

harmonic resonance, formative communities for, 175–76

Harmony (case study), 166–71

Henri, Robert, 101

hierarchy of needs, *23*, 23–26, *26*, 30, 72, 144, 187, 192

How to Live a Meaningful Life (Burnett and Evans), goal and organization of, 10–12

human-centered design (HCD) movement, 35. *See also* design thinking

humanness. *See also* becoming

becoming more fully human, 9

Be-Do-Become cycle, 57–59, *58*, 165–66

flow state and, 70

Man's Search for Meaning (Frankl) on meaning-making, 14

impact

defined, 70

meaning and purpose reframed for, 18–21

reframing, 21

as temporary, 20–21

implicit functions of brain, 136–37

infinite games, 77–79, 193–94

Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul, The (Zweig), 192–93

inspiration, 118

integration check (for compass values), 123–24

intention

action from, 54

transactional world as world of intent, 84

interconnectedness, flow world and, 72–73

in-the-moment flow

Magic Trees (Practicing In-the-Moment Awareness) exercise, 152–54

simple flow as in-the-moment and extended, 144–50

introversion, availability and, 45–46

Irwin, Robert, 100

Jung, Carl, 193–94

Kipling, Rudyard, 81, *81*

latent wonderfulness, 96

Lawrence (case study), 94–95

learning, 188–89, 192. *See also* curiosity

Lembke, Anna, 151–52

Lena (case study), 115–16, 120, 122, 125–27

Let Your Life Speak (Palmer), 117–18

life stages, 187–202

awareness of, 187

designing meaning for change of, 12

elderhood, embracing, 196–97

first half of life, 189–92

first half of life, Odyssey Years, 188–89

midlife, stumbling into, 194

parenting and partnering during, 197–200

second half of life, 192–97

Try Stuff exercises for, 200–202

Little League example, 51–52

living in the moment, 39–40

Loft (graduate design studio, Stanford University), 26

"luck," availability and, 45–46

Lyme disease example, 115–16

Magic Trees (Practicing In-the-Moment Awareness) exercise, 152–54

Man's Search for Meaning (Frankl), 14

Maslow, Abraham, *23*, 23–26, *26*, 30, 72, 144, 187, 192

Mattea (case study), 5–6, 8

matters of ultimate concern, 121–23. *See also* My Lifeview (for compass building)

meaning and meaning-making, 1–12. *See also* coherency; design thinking; flow state; flow world and transactional world; formative communities; life stages; meaning and purpose reframed; mindset

availability of meaning in your current lifestyle, 163–64

design as way forward for, 10–12

Designing Your Life (Burnett and Evans), core message, 1–2

design needed for, 203–4

discontent and, 1–3, 72

finding your own way to, 205–8

meaning, defined, 70

meaning *in* life versus meaning *of* life, 14–15, 205

My Lifeview (for compass building), 117–19, 121–23 (*see also* coherency; compass)

prototyping your life for, 5

self-transcendence, 25–26, *26*, 72, 144, 187, 192

as universal, 8–10

weight of the world's problems (Atlas example) and, 6–8, 14

Weltschmerz (world pain/discontent) and, 3

as wicked problem, 4–5

work and coherency sightings, 128–30

meaning and purpose reframed, 11

dysfunctional beliefs, 18–19, 24–26

fulfillment and, 18–19, 21–26, *23*, *26*

impact and, 18–21

meaning *in* life versus meaning *of* life, 14–15, 205

"more" versus meaning, 5–6, 27, 190–91

purpose and passion, 15–18, 188

reframing for problem-finding before problem-solving, 13–14

reframing mindset for, 30–31

scandal of particularity and, 26–30

Your POV Assessment for, 31–32

Michelangelo, 38

midlife, stumbling into, 194. *See also* life stages

Miller, Henry, 101

Miller, Lisa, 80–82

mindfulness, 150–51

mindset. *See also* availability mindset; create your world mindset; radical acceptance mindset; wonder

availability and wonder twofer, 56–57

availability mindset, 44–46

create your world mindset, 52–54

Designer's Way and meaning-making, 40–41, 57 (*see also* design thinking)

fully alive mindset (being present), 25, 49

fully engaged and calmly detached mindset, 50–52

as habit, 40–41

reframing of, 7, 11, 30–31, 67 (*see also* meaning and purpose reframed)

wonder mindset, 41–44, 56–57

Mindsight Institute, 73

"Miracles" (Stookey), 43

moment-making

design thinking and, 37

living in the moment, 39–40

meaning design and, 36–38

particularity and, 30 (*see also* scandal of particularity)

"more" versus meaning, 5–6, 27, 190–91

morning meditation practice, 87

"morning of life," 193–94

motivation for work, 119–21. *See also* work

multiverse experiment, 24–25

Museum Magic: Curating Your Curiosity (exercise), 106–10

My Current Story (for compass building), 115–16

My Lifeview (for compass building), 117–19, 121–23

mystery. *See also* wonder

Curiosity + Mystery = Wonder (Wonder Formula), 44, 96

defined, 42

wonder and, 94–95

My Workview (for compass building), 117–21

myth. *See* spirituality

National Institutes of Health, 24

nature, wonder and, 99

negativity

during Odyssey Years, 189

perception of, 7

neuroscience. *See* brain and cognition

Odyssey Years, 188–89

Olympic athletes. *See* athletes and sports examples

onion chopping example, 145–49

open mind for wonder mindset, 95–101

others, comparison to. *See* social media

others, sympathy for, 85–86

Our Town (Wilder), 41–42

outcome

decision quality and, 50–52

transactional world and, 71 (*see also* flow world and transactional world)

work and coherency sightings, 129

Outward Bound, 29

Palmer, Parker, 117–18

parenting and partnering, 197–200

particularity

availability mindset and, 44–46

moments and moment-making, 30

scandal of particularity, 26–30, 37, 98, 138–40, 204

passion

as *my* passion, 17

Odyssey Years and, 188

purpose and, 15–18

Pax (case study), 175

peak flow, 138, 139, *143*, 143–45, 149. *See also* flow state

Peak Flow Reflection exercise, 156–59

perception. *See* reframing

Pew Research Center, 97, 99

phones. *See also* social media

attention economy and, 98

screen-based childhood, 198–99

play-based childhood, 198–99

positive psychology

founding of, 69

on gratitude lists, 128

on work satisfaction, 119

Power of Myth, The (Campbell), 70

practice-to-production trap, 87–88, 190–91
prefrontal cortex, 137, 188
presenting problems, 167, 169–73, 181
present in the moment (fully alive mindset), 25, 49
prioritizing, for compass values, 124–25
problem-solving
    for design formative communities, 181
    presenting problems, 167, 169–73, 181
    problem-finding as priority, 13–14
Product Realization Lab (PRL), 37
prototyping
    designing formative communities with, 177–81
    design thinking importance of, 39–40
    iterations for, 35–36
    practice as never-ending prototype, 40–41, 88
    quick and easy as ideal, 83
    trying new ways for, 5
purpose and passion, 15–18, 188. *See also* meaning and meaning-making; meaning and purpose reframed
Put on Your Wonder Glasses (exercise), 101–6, 201

radical acceptance mindset
    for coherent life, 114
    defined, 47–49
    radical acceptance and availability mindsets, as twofer, 54–56
    radical acceptance and availability mindsets, for flow state, 140–43, *142*, *143*
rapture of being alive, 135
readiness, generative action as, 55
real-ization and design, 37–39
recalibration, of compass, 127, 201
reflection
    conversation and, 173–74

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) exercise, 182–83

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) practice, 163–66, *164*, 180, 202

Peak Flow Reflection exercise, 156–59

Reframing Ladder (Practicing Radical Acceptance) exercise, 62–66

reframing of mindset, 11. *See also* meaning and purpose reframed

of flow world and transactional world, 67 (*see also* flow world and transactional world)

for meaning and purpose, 30–31 (*see also* meaning and purpose reframed)

need for, 7

Reg (case study), 111, 113–14, 118

relationships, personal, 197–200

relevancy check (for compass values), 124

religion. *See* spirituality

Rohr, Richard, 187, 189, 193–95

Rona (case study), 174–75

Roth, Bernie, 62

samurai wisdom, *Hagakure* (book) on, 206

scandal of particularity

defined, 26–30

flow state and, 138–40

moment-making and, 37

wonder and, 98

your life as, 204

science, wonder and, 95. *See also* brain and cognition

second half of life, stage of, 192–97. *See also* life stages

Second Mountain (Brooks), 176

Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Things One Sees (Irwin), 100

self-actualization. *See also* life stages

as becoming, 23, 25

flow state and, 138–40

Maslow's hierarchy of needs on, *23*, 23–26, *26*, 30, 144, 187, 192

self-transcendence, 25–26, *26*, 72, 188, 192. *See also* life stages

Seligman, Martin, 69, 121

settling, worries about, 22

Seventh-Day Savoring exercise, 183–84

Siegel, Dan, 72–73

simple flow

- as in-the-moment and extended, 144–50
- Magic Trees (Practicing In-the-Moment Awareness) exercise, 152–54

social anxiety, availability and, 45–46

social media

- attention economy and, 98
- comparing yourself to friends on, 2, 25
- flow state and, 151–52

Socrates, 164

"Something I owe to the soil that grew" (Kipling), 81, *81*

"Song of Myself" (Whitman), 24, 25

Sonya (case study), 3–5, 18

soul, belief in, 97, 192–93. *See also* spirituality

spirituality

- "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water" (Zen proverb), 149
- *Hagakure* (book of samurai wisdom), 206
- *Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul, The* (Zweig) on, 192–93
- My Lifeview (for compass building) and, 122 (*see also* coherency; compass)
- wonder and, 96–97, 102

Spirituality Mind Body Institute, 80

staff meeting example, 83–84

stages of life. *See* life stages

Stanford University

- authors' work at, 3
- decision analysis, 50–52
- Designing Your Life class, 36, 188

Design Program, 9, 36, 136

design thinking at, 35–36

Distinguished Careers Institute, 161–63, 172–75

Loft (graduate design studio), 26

Product Realization Lab (PRL), 37

state of grace concept, 102

Steena (case study), 112, 114, 118

Stookey, Noel Paul, 43

storytelling

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) exercise, 182–83

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) practice, 163–66, *164*, 180, 202

responsibility for your story, 53

Sudden Savoring exercise, 185–86, 202

sunset example, 42–43

Sweeny, Kate, 152

Take a Sniffari (Sniff Walk) exercise, 155–56, 202

Tale of Two Worlds. *See* flow world and transactional world

Taoism, *wu wei* concept, 102

technology. *See* phones; social media

"A Theory of Human Motivation" (Maslow), 23

time issues. *See also* life stages

formative communities as long game, 176–77

scheduling for formative communities, 177–81

timelessness and flow state, 72

transactional world. *See also* flow world and transactional world

coherency for, 128–32

defined, 68, 71

formative communities versus, 162–63

meaning *in* life versus meaning *of* life, 14–15, 205

presenting problems and, 167, 169–73, 181

reframing of, 67, 79–80

Transactional World Trickle-Down Effect, 197–98

transcendency

flow world for, 72

self-transcendence, 25–26, *26*, 72, 144, 187, 192

wonder and, 96–98

Try Stuff exercises

about, 10

Build Your Compass exercise, 132, 200–201

Choose Life, 59–61

Coherency Sightings Log exercise, 132–33, 201

for designing formative communities, 177–81

for different life stages, 200–202

Engage-Reflect-Storytell (E-R-S) exercise, 182–83

exercises for formative communities, 182–86

Flip the World Switch, 90, 201–2

Flow Walking Meditation, 154–55

The Got To–Get To Reversal, 61, 202

Magic Trees (Practicing In-the-Moment Awareness), 152–54

Museum Magic: Curating Your Curiosity, 106–10

Peak Flow Reflection, 156–59

Put on Your Wonder Glasses, 101–6, 201

Reframing Ladder (Practicing Radical Acceptance), 62–66

Seventh-Day Savoring, 183–84

Sudden Savoring, 185–86, 202

Take a Sniffari (Sniff Walk), 155–56, 202

Your POV Assessment, 31–32

user experience (U/X) design, 36

values

coherent life and alignment of, 112–13

forming convictions during Odyssey Years, 188

identifying, for compass, 123–27 (*see also* coherency)

vibration example, 176

video gaming, 152

visual thinking, 136–37

"ways," samurai wisdom on, 206

weight of the world's problems (Atlas example), 6–8, 14

Weltschmerz (world pain/discontent), 3

"What have you done for me lately?" syndrome, 20

"What's happening?" asking, 86

Whitman, Walt, 24, 25

wicked problem, defined, 4

Wilder, Thornton, 41–42

willingness. *See* availability mindset

wonder mindset, 11, 12, 93–110

availability mindset and wonder mindset twofer, 56–57

curiosity and, 93, 99

Curiosity + Mystery = Wonder (Wonder Formula), 44, 96

defined, 93–94

flow state and, 137

mystery and, 94–95

open mind for mindset of, 95–101

scandal of particularity and, 98

self-transcendence and, 26

spirituality and, 96–97

Try Stuff exercises for, 101–10

work. *See also* coherency

coherency sightings on the job, 128–30

motivation for, 119–21

My Workview (for compass building), 117–21

work force retention, 6

wu wei concept, 102

Your POV Assessment exercise, 31–32

Zen proverb, 149

Zweig, Connie, 192–93

Image Descriptions

Description 1: A hand drawn pyramid chart of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The pyramid is divided into five horizontal levels, each labeled with a category of human needs. From bottom to top, the levels are Physiological Needs, Safety & Security, Love & Belonging, Self-Esteem, and Self Actualization. BACK.

Description 2: A hand drawn pyramid chart of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs — Revised. The pyramid is divided into six horizontal levels, each labeled with a category of human needs. From bottom to top, the levels are Physiological Needs, Safety & Security, Love & Belonging, Self-Esteem, Self Actualization, and Self-Transcendence. BACK.

Description 3: The table compares five aspects Focus, Task, Action, Orientation, and Role, between two approaches, Transactional and Flow. For Focus, the Transactional approach emphasizes outcomes, while the Flow approach emphasizes experiences. For Task, the Transactional approach involves problem solving, whereas the Flow approach involves moment making. For Action, the Transactional approach is described as reaching-directing, while the Flow approach is described as receiving-recognizing. For Orientation, the Transactional approach is centered on self, while the Flow approach is oriented beyond self. Lastly, for Role, the Transactional approach identifies as activist, while the Flow approach identifies as participant. BACK.

Description 4: The illustration features a minimalist line drawing of two human profiles, one facing left and the other facing right, connected at the neck and shoulders to form a single, shared outline. Inside the shared neck and shoulders area, a poem is written in italic text:
Something I owe to the soil that grew,
More to the life that fed,
But most to Allah who gave me two
Separate sides of my head.
I would go without shirt or shoes,
Friends, tobacco, or bread,
Sooner than for an instant lose
Either side of my head. BACK.

Description 5: The flowchart depicts a cyclical relationship between three elements Who You Are, What You Believe, and What You Do. The flow begins with Who You Are, which leads to What You Believe. An arrow then connects What You Believe to What You Do, and another arrow completes the cycle by linking back to Who You Are. BACK.

Description 6: A chart showing a state of optimal experience, by mapping the relationship between challenge and skill. The vertical axis is labeled Challenge and increases from bottom to top while the horizontal axis is labeled Skill and increases from left to right. A diagonal band labeled Flow runs from the bottom left to the top right, representing the balance between challenge and skill where Flow occurs. Above the Flow band is a region labeled Anxiety. Below the Flow band is a region labeled Boredom. BACK.

Description 7: The graph is a rectangular diagram divided into eight triangular sections, each representing a different emotional state based on the interaction between the Challenge level vertical axis and the Skill level horizontal axis. The vertical axis, labeled Challenge level, ranges from Low, Medium, and High. The horizontal axis, labeled Skill level, ranges from Low, Medium, and High. The graph is divided into eight labeled regions apathy, worry, anxiety, arousal, flow, control, relaxation, and boredom. The emotional states are distributed as follows, the bottom left corner, where both Skill and Challenge levels are Low, is labeled Apathy. When Challenge level is Medium and Skill level is Low, the state is labeled Worry. When Challenge level is High and Skill level is Low, the state is labeled Anxiety. When Challenge level is Low and Skill Level is Medium, the state is labeled Boredom. When Challenge level is High and Skill level is Medium, the state is labeled Arousal. When the Challenge level is Low and the Skill level is High, the state is labeled Relaxation. When the Challenge level is Medium and the Skill level is High, the state is labeled Control. When the Challenge level is High and the Skill level is High, the state is labeled Flow. BACK.

Description 8: The diagram shows the concept of Flow Potential at its center, encircled by a boundary labeled Radical Acceptance. This boundary acts as a protective layer, shielding the central concept from external negative thoughts. Outside the boundary, several arrows point inward, each labeled with a negative thought or distraction. These include You'll fail again, Stop!, Can we go now?, This is stupid, Watch out! and Can't find a better way? BACK.

Description 9: TThe diagram shows the concept of Flow Potential at its center, encircled by a boundary labeled Radical Acceptance, with an interior layer labeled Availability pointing arrows towards the center. Outside the boundary, several arrows point inward, each labeled with a negative thought or distraction. These include You'll fail again, Stop!, Can we go now?, This is stupid, Watch out! and Can't find a better way? BACK.

Description 10: The chart depicts the relationship between Challenge, Skill, and different mental states. The vertical axis is labeled Challenge and increases from bottom to top while the horizontal axis is labeled Skill and increases from left to right. A large diagonal band labeled Simple Flow runs from the bottom left to the top right, representing the balance between challenge and skill where Flow occurs. The middle of the Simple Flow band is labeled as Traditional Flow channel. At the top end of this channel, where Challenge and Skill are at its highest, is a state labled Peak Flow. Above the Simple Flow

band is a region labeled Anxious. Below the Simple Flow band is a region labeled Bored. BACK.

Description 11: The chart depicts a continuous cycle with three interconnected steps Engage, Reflect, and Storytell. Each step is represented by a circle, and arrows connect them in a clockwise direction, forming a loop. The process begins with Engage, which leads to Reflect via a curved arrow. From Reflect, another arrow points to Storytell. Finally, an arrow connects Storytell back to Engage, completing the cycle. BACK.

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, language-learning model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

Copyright © 2026 by William Burnett and David J. Evans

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Simon Element Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Simon Element hardcover edition February 2026

SIMON ELEMENT is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, LLC

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Jacket design by Jenny Carrow
Jacket art by Getty Images and Adobe Stock

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025038540

ISBN 978-1-6680-8489-2

ISBN 978-1-6680-8490-8 (ebook)